

## Chapter 6

### Comparative Study of Representations in Bengali and English Narratives

Representation of railways in various forms of literature has been discussed in the previous chapters. This chapter is an attempt to validate the literary representations through the factual data to see the differences and similarities in their respective interpretations. The chapter therefore focuses upon the importance and impact of railways through Bengali and English narratives. The term 'narratives' in this chapter is to mean opinions and statements of those British officials and Bengali men who were both directly as well as indirectly concerned with railways as a phenomenon. The chapter also attempts to weave a comparison between the diverse opinions of officials as well as scholars tracing various facets of railways such as introduction and impact on both the economy and society of Bengal.

As the introduction of railways in Bengal was considered by colonial administrators, some of them sincerely believed that the railways would not only benefit English trade but also local social groups. One such individual who can be believed to be responsible for the introduction of railways in Bengal was R. Macdonald Stephenson. He was the nephew of George Stephenson Macdonald who was a known figure promoting railways in England. R. Macdonald Stiphenson, an engineer by profession, came to Bengal in 1841 with an ambition of running railways in Bengal.

To put his plan into action, he carried out discussion with many other stakeholders both Europeans as well as Indians. Macdonald wrote to the Governor General of India and the Governor of Bengal. He also wanted to seek the opinions of different groups such as British traders and other officials employed explaining the importance of railways in India. Besides these, he sent a written proposal to the Court of Directors of the English East India Company mentioning his plan to build railways in Bengal. However, unfortunately, it was pushed away as a 'wild project' and it took another three years to even carry out a discussion again on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*. Sreerampore: J. H. Peters, p. 33

In 1844 he once again wrote to the Governor of Bengal Presidency emphasising the significance of railways in the region. This time, he was better prepared with the reasons to convince the Indian government to go with his plan. Macdonald gave two primary reasons which are as follows:

1. Long-route railway lines were required to transfer the military troops whenever in need, for an efficient political control of far flung Presidencies.
2. To provide faster means of conveyance of raw materials from the hinterlands to the port towns and of machine manufactures goods from the ports to the interiors. The long distant lines were expected to bring products such as opium-indigo, sugar, rice, grain, saltpetre, shell, lac, drugs, minerals and spices from various districts of Bengal province to the ports through railway lines.<sup>2</sup>

The Governor of Bengal agreed with Stephenson but did not commit to anything.<sup>3</sup> Macdonald had also conferred with the members of Bengal Chambers of Commerce, highest ranking members of the British Trade Guild, and its representatives, including Captain A. S. Waugh, the Surveyor General of India, Captain Goddwyn Garrison, the Fort Willium Engineer and Civil Architect, W. Green, the Military Board Secretary, and E. Wilkinson, the Customs Supervisor, and others.<sup>4</sup>

Although the intent of Macdoland was to discuss and emphasise on the need of introduction of railways in the region of Bengal, yet at many levels the discussions reached up to connecting the Presidency seats of British power in India. As a result most of the responses from the above-mentioned officials regarding the importance were in respect to the whole of India. From the discussion with the above officials mainly four types of responses are observed.

1. The railway was to facilitate the well-known British demand that followed the Industrial Revolution for larger international markets and better supplies of raw materials. Through their connections with British merchants and manufacturers, they presented the idea that if railways were established, India might become an abundant source of raw materials, as well as a significant buyer of textiles and other British-made goods. For example, the President of the Indian Board,

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<sup>2</sup> Stephenson, R.M. (1845). *Report Upon The Practicability and Advantages of the Introduction of Railways into British India*. London: Kelly & Co., p. 7

<sup>3</sup> Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*. Sreerampore: J. H. Peters, p.44

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp. 5-53

Sir Charles Wood, proposed that a greater supply of cotton might be obtained from India, which would greatly benefit colonial purposes and railways would be catalyst to accomplish that. It was made clear that both Bengal as well as India had the potential to become a major market for textiles and other British-made products.

2. It was expected that Railways had the potential to become a very profitable sector to invest money. This can be discerned from the recognition given by Lord Dalhousie stating that Railways of India was the ideal sector to invest money.<sup>5</sup>
3. Administrative considerations also prompted the British to establish railways in India. The then Governor of Bengal, Lord Hardinge, wrote in 1848 in favour of the development of railways in India, stating that the ability to quickly gather army, artillery, and supplies may prove life changing and create a major insurrectionary reserve and ensure safety of the Empire. This point was also furthered by Lord Dalhousie who believed that the railway would improve administrative facilities and military force movement across long distances, strengthening British control over the provinces.<sup>6</sup> This discussion was also carried out in the British Parliament. George Warren, employed as colonel in the Indian Army, showed the importance of railways in dispersing troops in need, before a Select Committee of the House of Commons. They showcased that it was impractical to overestimate the feasibility of issuing orders with soldiers and supplies in a shorter amount of time and of getting intelligence from reserve areas of the nation in as few hours as it would have taken days or even weeks. Moreover, introduction of railways would have kept the troops in healthier condition even though they would be posted in remote areas which would save a significant number of deaths from illness. Stores at the different depots might not have been stocked to the same degree as needed, and there would have also been less chance of deterioration and unintentional climate-related damage. The efficacy of the troops might have been directly

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<sup>5</sup> Thorner, D. (1955). The Pattern of Railway Development in India. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Feb., 1955), pp. 201-216

<sup>6</sup> <sup>6</sup> Railay Minutes of Governor General, Lord Dalhousie, 20th April, 1853

correlated with their reduction in number, but the railways solved all the hazards the troops had to face at that time.<sup>7</sup>

4. From the Utilitarian point of view, British officials stressed upon the advantages to the common people which would be provided by this new speedier transport system which was to guarantee better facilities for the society as a whole. For instance, W P Andrew, favouring the establishment of railways, published reports, which he sent to the Chairman of the East India Company. In these reports, he stated that the success or failure of the first railway in India had the greatest impact on the social standing and overall prosperity of the people living in the Eastern regions of the British Empire, as well as the preservation of England's leadership in trade and manufacturing.

It becomes apparent from the above discussion that establishment of railway networks were considered to be vital for both the British economy as well as the Indians. Railways not only offered an effective route to move raw commodities from the interior to ports for sale, but also could be strategically used for military objectives in addition to their economic advantages. Quick troop and supply movements were considered essential for keeping the situation under control and reacting to possible uprisings or outside threats.

Railways were a novelty for the Indians and therefore the introduction of this technology naturally evoked diverse reactions and responses from both intelligentsia as well as common people. Some Bengali business owners believed that the railways would advance their interests by making it easier and more affordable for commodities to be transported. This viewpoint is consistent with the notion that railways might promote commerce and economic development. The most well-known of these was Dwarkanath Tagore, a great trader from Bengal and the grandfather of poet Rabindranath Tagore. Apparently, his intent of supporting railways in Bengal stemmed from his travel by train in London, where he wished to have this form of communication system to be introduced in India as well. He in fact is considered to be a pioneer in investing indigenous capital in railways to carry coal from Raniganj to the port of Calcutta.<sup>8</sup> He provided one-third of the funding for this section of the line, since he was so keen to have a railway linked to the collieries.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephenson, R.M. (1845). *Report Upon The Practicability and Advantages of the Introduction of Railways into British India*. London: Kelly & Co., p.37

<sup>8</sup> Dey, C. (2013). *Purba Railer Pathe Bardhamaner Paschim Balaye*. Kolkata: Pub: Chhanda Dey, pp. 69-70

Additionally, Tagore was also willing to provide a sizable dividend for the line between Calcutta and Burdwan.<sup>9</sup> In 1844, Dwarkanath's company, Carr, Tagore & Co., made an offer to obtain a third of the funds needed to build a railway that would have connected Calcutta's northwest to the coalfields above Burdwan. Unfortunately, Dwarkanath Tagore passed away before his dream could be materialised. Soon enough the railway industry was monopolised by white men.<sup>10</sup>

R. S. Macdonald consulted with other merchants and businessmen regarding his railway project. Amongst them Babu Mutti Lal Seal supported the idea of building railways in Bengal. Mutti Lal believed that the country would greatly benefit with the introduction of railways. However he expressed his concerns over people's reactions. Nonetheless, he was sure of a significant return of investments. His assessment was based on the following factors: the building lines linked the city with the rich interior markets. Secondly, since the population was increasing, it was expected to further increase the internal traffic. Thirdly, Seal attributed the return of investment to the cheap manpower and cheap materials. It is apparent that Mutty Lal Seal looked only at the financial benefits and refrained from expressing an opinion about its use in military benefits for the British.<sup>11</sup>

Ram Komul Sen, another businessman, responded to the survey of feasibility of railways circulated by Macdonald, by sending an estimate of the cost of conveyance in India.<sup>12</sup> His role is also termed as 'information broker'.<sup>13</sup> Apart from Ram Komul Sen, another significant businessman was Ram Gopal Ghosh, a Derozian, who actively supported the effort to build railways in Bengal. He believed that the railways would boost his actual business of importing and selling British manufactured products by expanding the market. Ghosh who was a Bengal renaissance reformer, saw the emergence of railways as the inevitable 'civilising impact of steam'.<sup>14</sup> Based on the

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<sup>9</sup> Stephenson, R.M. (1845). *Report Upon The Practicability and Advantages of the Introduction of Railways into British India*. London: Kelly & Co., pp. 48 & 53

<sup>10</sup> Thorner, D. (1955). The Pattern of Railway Development in India. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Feb., 1955), pp. 201-216

<sup>11</sup> Stephenson, R.M. (1845). *Report Upon The Practicability and Advantages of the Introduction of Railways into British India*, London: Kelly & Co., p. 35

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.64

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Chakrabarty, D. (1971). The Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance: A Note on the Early Railway Thinking in Bengal. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol-33, pp. 560-562

responses provided by the four prominent Bengali business figures, it is evident that the upper class business community in Bengal was keen on building railways. Besides the intellectuals in Bengal, some other writers wrote extensively on the introduction of railways. Some discussed how it was a boon to Bengali society whereas some expressed concern. For the purposes of these studies few of the Bengali narratives are discussed below.

A future picture of a railway line has been described before the commencement of the railways in an essay titled ‘*Lohar Rasta*’ (Iron Road). The use of tense in the language of the essay confirms that the text was written before the railway began to function. Later it was incorporated in the textbook ‘*Balakdiger Shikshar Nimitte Bangiya Pathavali*’ (The Bengali Instructor, for the Use of School), Vol-4, in 1866. This essay has discussed a wide variety of ways that railways could serve society. It postulates that the Bengali or local traders would benefit as the goods would reach earlier than it had by sea route. For instance, when the trader sent sugar to England via boat from Ghazipur, Varanasi, and Azimgarh, it almost took two months to reach at the Calcutta port. This caused a delay and hence resulted in losses. The essay reasons that however, with the railway-lines the distance would be cut much shorter. ‘*Lohar Rasta*,’ further recounts the benefits of the establishment of railways to the colonial administrators. It says, “if the iron roads were ready, it would have also been beneficial in terms of governance. In the past, when war broke out in the western province, the Governor General had to leave the capital. However, if the iron road had been ready, he could have issued various orders about the war from Calcutta. Additionally, whenever required, they could easily have been sent to distant parts of the country within three days.”<sup>15</sup> The assessment expressed in ‘*Lohar Rasta*’ was reverberated through the narrative of Dwarkanath Tagore.

At that time, Calcutta had emerged as one of the important ports for international trade. As has been mentioned earlier Dwarkanath Tagore was an important businessman in Bengal.<sup>16</sup> He visited England in 1842, he saw an opportunity to further his profits if railways were introduced in Bengal. As a result he became an advocate for its introduction. He wrote letters explicitly stating the need

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<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, (1866). ‘*Lohar Rasta*’ in *Balakdiger Shikshar Nimitte Bangiya Pathavali* (The Bengali Instructor, for the Use of School), Vol-4. Calcutta: Encyclopedia Press, pp. 134-35

<sup>16</sup> Dey, C. (2013). *Purba Railer Pathe Bardhamaner Paschim Balaye*. Kolkata: Pub: Chhanda Dey, pp. 69-70

for faster transport, like rail lines in India. In a letter in 1843, unable to complete the journey to Allahabad, he wrote, “The great holy Ganges of our country is no longer the small Rhine river of your country; the current was so strong that we had to return to Calcutta.” At the end of this letter, Dwarkanath laments, “Unfortunately, we have no railways in India, and travelling here is neither trivial nor easy.”<sup>17</sup> So when Stephenson first submitted his report for the establishment of a railway company in Calcutta, Dwarkanath said he would raise one-third of the capital required to build a railway line from Calcutta to the coal mines. Although he later withdrew the joint venture railway proposal for various reasons, he himself established the Bengal Great Western Railway in 1844 as a rival to the East India Railway Company. Unfortunately for the Bengalis, he passed away in 1846, putting an end to their efforts to invest in and advance the railway sector.<sup>18</sup>

The essay *Lohar Rasta* draws our attention to other important purposes of railway introduction in India: such as furthering the missionary activities, and increased social intermingling of people. Firstly it points out that the greatest potential benefit of railways is that they facilitated evangelists to travel from one place to another to spread the message of Christianity. Otherwise it would have forced them to undertake long hazardous journeys.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the railways aimed to connect Bengal with other parts of British India, like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and other major cities. This connectivity facilitated the movement of people, goods, and ideas, fostering a sense of national identity and unity within the British Empire. Further the author explains that train travel would allow the people of Bengal to intermingle with people of other cultures and broaden their horizons.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly the train itself was a microcosm of Indian cultures. Train compartments brought people from different walks of life into close proximity. Passengers engage in conversations, sharing their experiences, stories, and perspectives. These interactions provide a platform for cultural exchange, where individuals learn about each other's customs, traditions, and ways of life. It creates an environment where people can engage in meaningful discussions and gain insights into various aspects of Indian culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Ghosh, S. (1991). Bashpiya rath O Railway Charit, *Koler Shahor Kolkata*. Kolkata: Ananda Publisher, p.77

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 81

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, (1866). ‘*Lohar Rasta*’ in Balakdiger Shikshar Nimitte Bangiya Pathavali (The Bengali Instructor, for the Use of School), Vol-4. Calcutta: Encyclopedia Press, p. 133

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.134

Railways provided a reliable and efficient means of social interaction as well. Ashapurn Devi, in her story *Naba Janma*, brings out the importance of railways in facilitating the villagers to participate in *melas*.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the purpose, its impact on society and the economy was tremendous. The huge volume of capacity and its speed gave society and the economy pace, comfort, and development as well. The growth of cities around the stations changed the landscape and economy of Bengal. Just a minute's stop on the platform conveys the message of the whole world to that region. Trains deliver newspapers, telegrams, bags of post, and various other necessary products from one place to another.<sup>22</sup> Train compartments in India serve as microcosms of the nation's cultural tapestry. The interactions, languages, cuisines, folklore, and social exchanges that take place within train compartments provide a condensed yet vibrant representation of India's rich and diverse cultural heritage, which has been inculcated within people around it, and people have found unity out of this diversity. This has also been seen through the medium of poems and prose as explained in the earlier chapters. It became clear from the above discussion that railways were considered as important by both the intellectuals and the common Bengali people. However, there were many narratives which also reflected the concerns of Bengali travellers or employees regarding the exploitative nature of British rule, where railways were used as a tool of exploitation. This has been evidenced amply in the previous chapters. This character of the exploitation through railways has been critically looked at by the economic nationalists and historians as well as has been reflected in people's narratives.

Bipan Chandra an economic historian argues that the railways played a crucial role in the extraction of resources from the hinterlands of India. They facilitated the transportation of commodities from Bengal such as coal, jute, tea, and indigo, which were significant revenue sources for the colonial administration.<sup>23</sup> Railways provided a means to transport these resources to the ports for export to Britain for its manufacturing units..<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the railways were instrumental in facilitating colonial administration and control in the vast region of the Bengal

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<sup>21</sup> Devi, A. (1985). *Naba Janma*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh pub, pp.7-12

<sup>22</sup> Gangopadhyay, N. (1979). *Mantra Mukhar* in Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanabali. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh Pub, p.87

<sup>23</sup> Chandra, B. (1968). *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India-Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*. New Delhi: People's publishers, pp.143-216

<sup>24</sup> Sen, S. (1990). *Railer Pa Chali*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p. 38

Presidency. It allowed for faster movement of colonial officials, military personnel, and administrators, enabling them to maintain law and order, collect taxes, and enforce colonial policies. Railways also aided in the rapid deployment of troops and efficient communication between different parts of Bengal. Thirdly, the main rationale behind the planning and construction of railways in Bengal was to meet their own ever growing need for better quality coal. The Bengal mines supplied more than 83% of the total coal output in India. The principal fields were Giridih, Barakar, Jharia, Raniganj, Chinakudi and their adjacent coal mines for steam ships and other steam engines.<sup>25</sup>

After a few years of the use of railways, people began to realise that what appeared to be a facilitative factor for the growth of indigenous economies was in fact used by the colonial masters as a tool for exploitation. This brought about changes in the narratives on railways in Bengal. There emerged articles in newspapers including weeklies and monthlies, books were published where people's views expressing either their anger or helplessness were published. Soon, railways in Bengal came to be seen as playing a major role in the devastation of both the rural and urban economy, which included the elimination of several regional professions, jeopardisation to the agricultural system, and the destruction of local trades. As has been mentioned earlier, leading newspapers reflect the changed tone of narrative from viewing the railways as beneficial to condemning the attitude of the government or the railway companies to pointing out the problems that railways caused to the Bengal economy in specific and Indian economy as a whole. The narratives in particular denounced the investment of foreign capital in railways, the extraction of revenues from Indians in the form of fares and tariffs, etc. that caused the Bengal economy to collapse. Bengali narratives in newspapers like *Sadharani*, *Sangbad Prabhakar*, *Prabashi*, *Amritabazar Patrika* etc, stressed upon these very negative impacts. A Bengali narrative in *Prabashi*, a renowned Bengali monthly newspaper, provides an important account of the socio-economic impact of railways on Bengal at that period. In one of its articles, it was written:

*"Up to this point, all the Indian and British people had received some sort of loss-gain and advantages-disadvantages. It's not that the railways haven't been useful to us. It has made trade more convenient, made it possible to convey commodities, made transportation more convenient,*

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<sup>25</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer*, (1908). Vol- 4, p. 261

contributed to the diffusion of knowledge, etc. But at the same time it had several negative effects on indigenous economy as well.”<sup>26</sup> (Translation Mine)

Another Bengali narrative in the same newspaper reported that the introduction of railways led to health issues amongst the Bengalis. For instance, construction of embankments for railways had created a stagnant water reservoir which had resulted in the spread of malaria as a communicable disease in many regions in Bengal. Recent studies also focused on it.<sup>27</sup> Few articles also focused on the negative impact of railways on small business of Bengalis. For example, it was reported in *Prabashi*, that the railways had destroyed small-scale rural industry. Although railways did provide employment opportunities to local youths but these low paying jobs with no opportunities for growth. The young men had left either their family businesses or their agricultural farms.

Bengali narratives through print media attempted to popularise and spread the anti-British propaganda and condemned the use of railways as a tool to exploit the Indian economy. The narrative covers the topics -i) The Government of India had taken loans from British investors to establish infrastructure for railways. This had led to a national loss due to loss in revenue in the form of guaranteed interest.<sup>28</sup> ii) Increase of rail fare gave more profit to the investors than to the Indian government, leading to the general loss of revenues iii) Draining of wealth from India through European employment with unnecessary higher salaries.<sup>29</sup> After the railways were introduced for two years, many Bengali narratives appeared in *Sangbad Prabhakar* that publicly criticised the ill effects of railways on the economy of Bengal. Many Bengali narratives in the daily newspapers also pointed out that the railways were built with the goal of producing money for the foreigners and had no benefits for India.<sup>30</sup> Same tune has been echoed Bengali narratives in *Sadharani*<sup>31</sup> and *Amritabazar Patrika*<sup>32</sup> as well.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Rail Bistarar Jonya Rhin’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1329 B. S. (c. 1922), pp.150-152

<sup>27</sup> Kazi, I. (1986). *Malaria in Bengal from 1860 to 1920: A Historical Study in a Colonial Setting (India)*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Michigan; Mukherjee, S.(2008). ‘ Environmental Thoughts and Malaria in Colonial Bengal: A study in Social response’. *Economic and Political weekly*, Vol. 43, Issue No. 12-13

<sup>28</sup> Related to this point has been discussed in Chapter 3 elaborately.

<sup>29</sup> Rail Bistarar Jonya Rhin, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1329 B. S. (c. 1922). pp.150-152

<sup>30</sup> ‘Notun Railpath’, *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 21 Jaishtha, 1263 B. S., (c.1856)

<sup>31</sup> *Sadharani*, 16th Aghran, 1280 B. S. (c.1873). p. 67

<sup>32</sup> ‘Bharatbarshe Railway’, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27th May, 1869, p. 242

Bengali narratives by the nationalists and nationalist historians become relevant here as they mention the decline of the economy of Bengal due to establishment of railways. Bankim Chandra, for instance, identified the impoverishment of poor farmers of Bengal due to the establishment of railways. In his essay "*Bangadesher Krishak*" (The Farmers of Bengal), as has been discussed in detail in Chapter-3, Bankim Chandra sarcastically poses the benefits of so called progress or modernity for common people. He argues that the condition of poor farmers was not altered by the introduction of railways as had been made out to be.<sup>33</sup> Another almost same representation with different cause, has been found in the narrative of Rabindranath Tagore, a polymath and a Nobel Laureate. In his essay, *Bilaser Fansh*, which he wrote after a meeting with a farmer of Birbhum area where he saw his poor condition due to the rise of price and superfluity of British commodities among the village people. When railways were built across Bengal's interior, they gained access to foreign commodities, which raised demand but left them short of living expenses. According to Rabindranath, British industrial growth led to a rise in poverty amongst the peasantry and the dominance of the mechanical industry in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>34</sup> He firmly believed that half of the British control in this country was due to railways and steamers.<sup>35</sup> Another litterateur Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his novel, *Srikanta* (written in 1927) shows that the primary goal of the country's railway network expansion was to increase commercial profits for the British, by exporting crops.<sup>36</sup>

Other economic nationalists of that time also viewed the establishment of railways as instrumental for 'Drain of Wealth'. It is important here to discuss the interventions of Dadabhai Naoroji. From the very beginning Dadabhai Naoroji raised his voice upon the matter. According to him Indian wealth was squeezed through land revenue and other means and then drained off to England, leaving no surplus in India. Investment of foreign capital in the railway industry was one of them. Dadabhai stated that the economic drain continued even after the completion of railways.<sup>37</sup> Another economic nationalist and a historian Rajani Palme Dutt, focused on the need for Indian produce in

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<sup>33</sup> Chattopadhyay, B. (1986), *Bangadesher Krishak, Vividha Prasanga, Bankim Rachanavali*, Kolkata: Tuli-kalam, p. 288

<sup>34</sup> Tagore, R. (1990). *Bilaser Fansh*, Samaj, Rabindra Rachanabali, Vol (13). Pub: Pashchimbanga Sarkar, p. 394

<sup>35</sup> *Samayik Sahitya Samalochana* <https://rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/9075>

<sup>36</sup> Chattopadhyay, S. C. (1961). *Srikanta*, Vol-III, Srikanta Akhanda. Kolkata: Indian Association Publishing, p.124

<sup>37</sup> Naoroji D. (1901). *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim, pp. 34-54

England, drove the development of administrative procedures and public infrastructure, so that the Indian produce could be manufactured and transported to England. After railways were established, especially throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, trade and industry saw rapid growth. However, the construction of railways and other infrastructure in India was done exclusively to meet the demands of the financial and commercial sectors, not those of the populace at large or their current level of development. Therefore, the global domination of capitalism in India destroyed the country's past and acted as a revolutionary force by dismantling the old economy and creating railways as a single, unified system of exploitation. Faster connectivity was therefore implemented in order to take advantage of the Indian farmers and to deprive them of their right to their own produce.<sup>38</sup>

R. C. Dutt, another economic historian, also had compelling views on the exploitative nature of Indian railways. He stated that the British spent money mostly into those projects that would pay off for them. The railways were selected because they improved British trade with India. Intentionally, they disregarded canal investment, which would have helped Indian agriculture. As a result, nothing was done to enhance and make use of the original canal system. Furthermore, a large number of pre-existing canals had been totally destroyed when railway embankments were created. Some regions that were isolated from the Ganges water supply, which was used to make looms, eventually became unproductive and infertile, while other regions that were not properly drained showed signs of advanced water logging. Additionally, little effort was made to construct appropriate embankments for the Ganges in its low course to prevent the severe erosion that has engulfed fields of crops, communities, and forests.<sup>39</sup> R. C. Dutt also stated that railways replaced traditional transport systems and so, a lot of people lost their jobs who were attached with that traditional transports.<sup>40</sup> Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, a revolutionary journalist and an associate of Sri Aurobindo remarked that as the railways was expanded, so did the English's wealth, but India lost her property.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Dutt, R. P. (1940). *India To-Day*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. pp. 30,34 & 37

<sup>39</sup> Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India Under Early British Rule 1757-1837*. London Routledge & Kagan paul Ltd. p.312

<sup>40</sup> Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India*. London: Routledge & Kagan Paul Ltd, p. 311

<sup>41</sup> Deuskar, S. G. (1904). 'Rail O khal', *Deshar Kotha (Annual journal)*. Kolkata. p. 54

It can be concluded from the above narratives that railways in Bengal have had a varied influence on the region's economy ever since it was introduced, as many different literary genres, narrations and print media have shown. Though poetry, prose and print media applauded railways at the early stage, gradually they started to show their rage towards the adverse impacts of railways, especially economic extortion. Prominent Bengali narrators found railways responsible for the poor condition of farmers of Bengal. Economic historians realised more strongly regarding the exploitative character of the railways. Building of railways, according to the economic nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji, R. C. Dutt, and R. P. Dutt, was itself a phenomenon of economic extortion of the Indian economy. Both of them showed that the investment of foreign capital in railways and dividends withdrawn in the form of revenues from the Indian economy was one of the ways of carrying out extortion of the Indian economy.

In comparison to the Bengali narratives, the British saw the building of railways in colonial India through the lenses of imperial consolidation and economic progress. Railways were viewed by British officials as being crucial in enabling the transfer of commodities and raw resources across long distances, which in turn supported trade and commerce. They thought that the development of railway networks connecting India's many regions would promote economic modernity and growth, eventually benefiting British colonial interests. In this section some of the newspapers, official documents and other English narrations have been used to explore the colonial views on the impact of railways on the economy of Bengal as well as India.

The introduction of railways was considered as revolutionary for the Indian economy by the zrevolutionise commerce networks and transportation across the large subcontinent. English newspapers of the era emphasised the importance of the railways that played a crucial role in enabling the movement of resources, people, and products, as well as colonial economic advantages. As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, the opening of the East Indian Railway has been remarked as 'red letter day'.<sup>42</sup> Establishment of railways in Bengal was hailed as the 'beginning of the idea of progress'. In addition, it was imagined as an 'awakening'

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<sup>42</sup> G. H. (1908). 'The Opening of the East Indian Railway. *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol- II, January, 1908. pp.55-61

phenomena which created the hope of ‘future commercial enterprise’.<sup>43</sup> *Bengal Harkaru, Statesman, Friends of India* etc. applauded the initiatives taken by the East Indian Railway from the very beginning. Official documents such as, report of Bengal Chambers of Commerce, Industrial Commission, Statistical Abstract showcase that the railways had a great impact on Bengal’s economy. Members of the Bengal Chambers of Commerce and Industry regarded the foundation of railways as the beginning of the ‘Modern Period’. Speech given by Samuel Liang addressing the Bengal Chambers of Commerce, showcased the improved condition of the masses of India caused by the introduction of railways and other scientific inventions. He saw railways and steamers as the missionaries of civilisation and material improvement carried with it by intellectual and moral progress.<sup>44</sup>

The account of the ‘Industrial Commission’ shows that the coming of railways in Bengal brought about significant changes in village economy. Earlier Bengal was self-sufficient with few local imports and exports were carried out within the economic circle that ranged from village to small towns mostly. But the report mentions that the introduction of railways changed the nature of the rural economy. Villagers in Bengal started to cultivate crops for exports especially cotton on a large scale, food stuffs, jute etc. The railways, as a speedier transportation, rendered scope to the peasants to export and import to the ‘land-locked villages’, which was merely visible before. Moreover, commencement of railways in colonial Bengal led to the emergence of markets either directly at railway stations or nearby. These markets became hubs where foreign exporters or major Indian collecting firms established their agencies. Additionally, the common farmer, known as the ryot, also benefited from the railways by gaining access to information about global price fluctuations for the crops they grew. In essence, the railways facilitated greater connectivity and access to market information, empowering both traders and farmers alike in colonial Bengal.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> G. H. (1908). ‘The Opening of the East Indian Railway. *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol- II, January, 1908. pp.55-61

<sup>44</sup> Tyson, G. W. (1953). ‘*The Modern period Begins*’, *Bengal chambers of Commerce and Industry, 1853-1953*. Calcutta: D.A. Lakin at the Statesman Ltd. p. 46

<sup>45</sup> Henry Holland, T. (1919). ‘India Before Railways’. *Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18*. India: H.M.S.O., pp. 2-7

The English narrative through the Report of the Industrial Commission also highlighted that railways provided access to imported goods like scissors, glass articles, iron, brass etc, which made the cultivator more easier to make or buy more ploughs and carts which led to further production. This further changed the position and lifestyle of the farmers and village artisans.<sup>46</sup>

On the basis of the data found in reports displaying English narratives, it can be discerned how development of railways led to the gradual progress of overseas trade in the region. The trade continued to be profitable except during the time of crises such as famines etc. The following table shows significant growth of overseas trade in Bengal after the coming of railways.

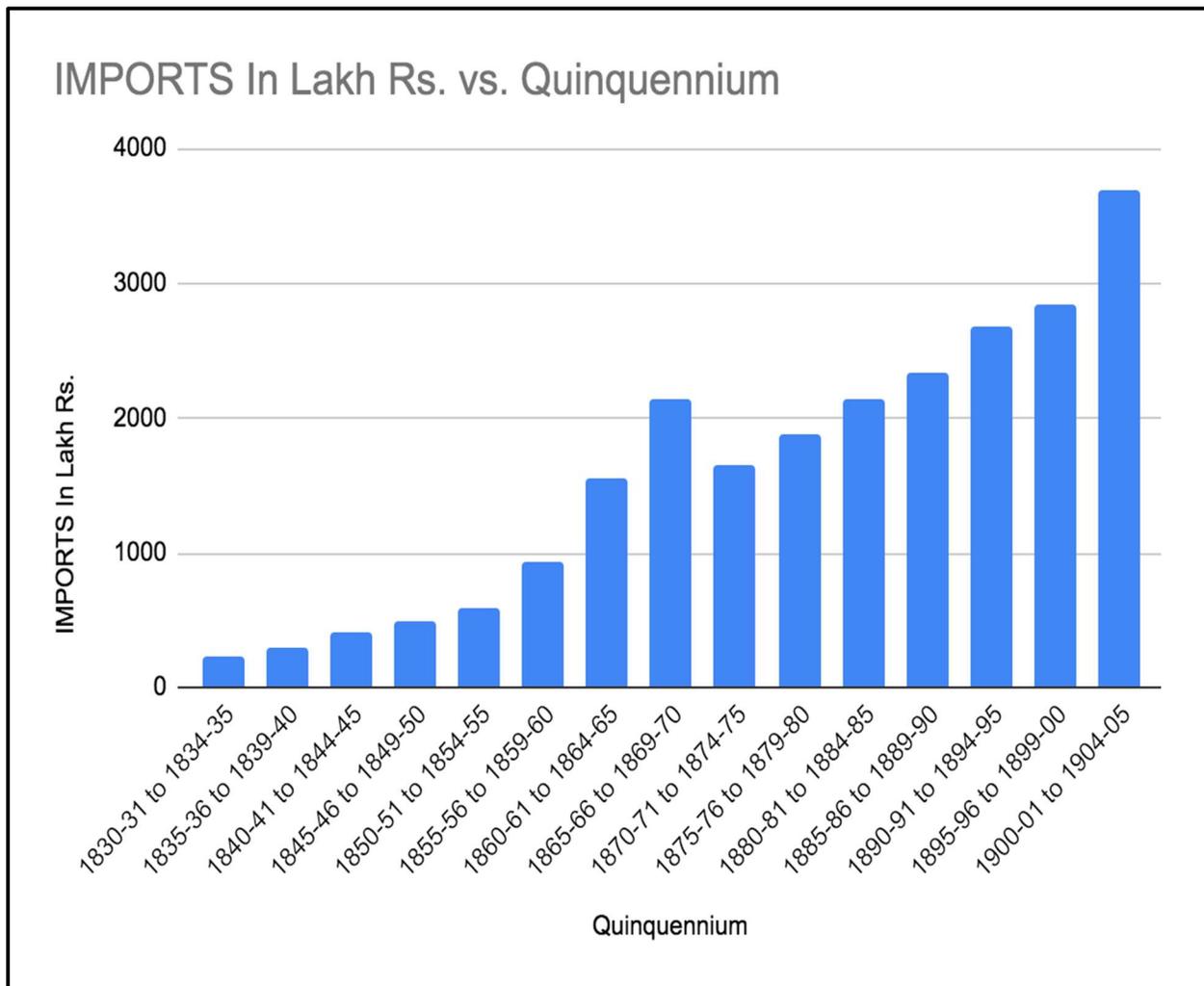
Table 7 & 8: Successive growth of imports and exports values 1830-31 to 1904-1905<sup>47</sup>

<b>QUINQUENNIUM</b>	<b>IMPORTS.</b>	<b>EXPORTS.</b>
	In Lakh Rs.	In Lakh Rs.
1830-31 to 1834-35	234.98	405.87
1835-36 to 1839-40	302.46	656.11
1840-41 to 1844-45	408.86	887.69
1845-46 to 1849-50	491.93	958.71
1850-51 to 1854-55	594.93	1075.45

<sup>46</sup> Henry Holland, T. (1919). 'India Before Railways'. *Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18*. India: H.M.S.O., pp.3-4

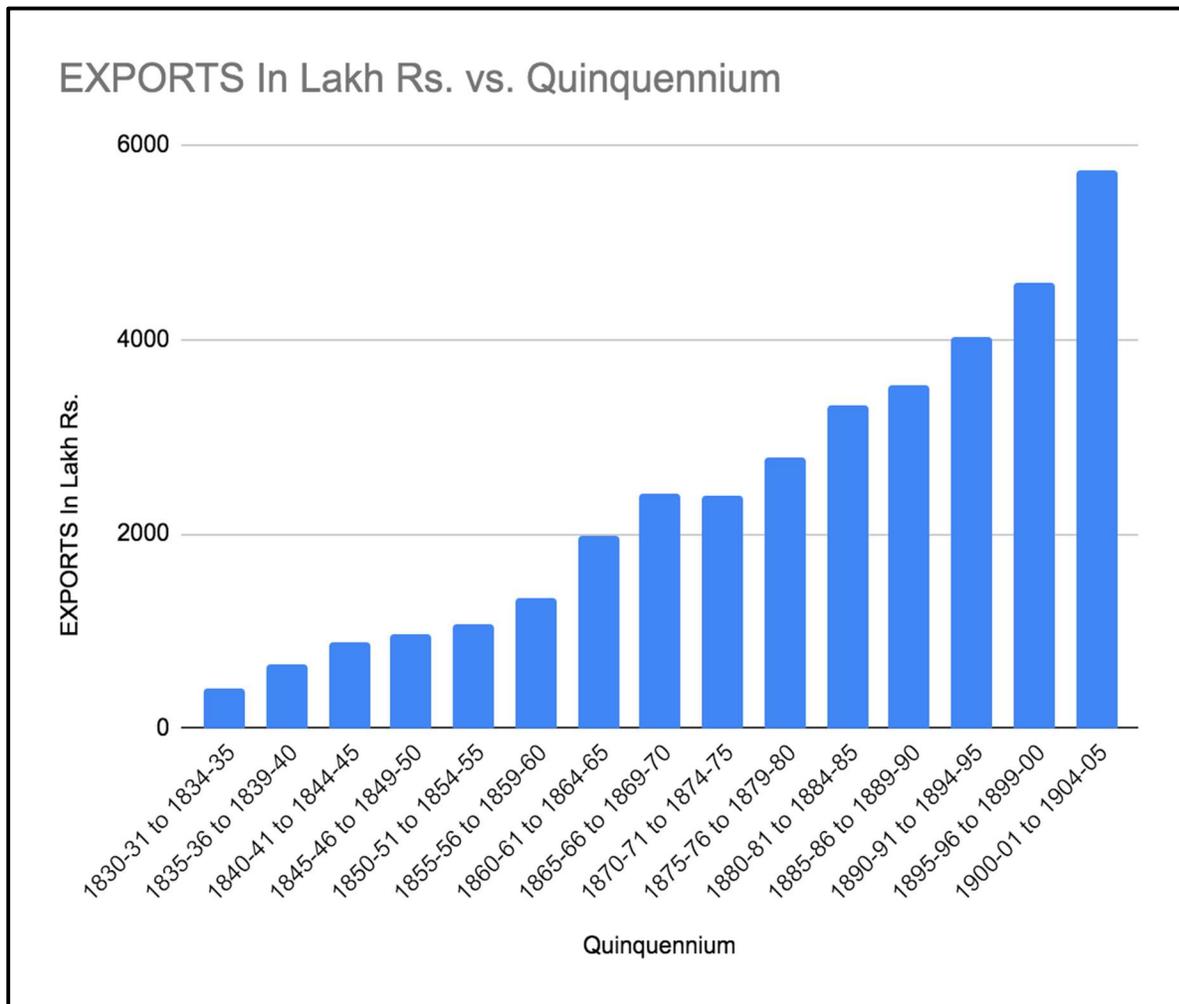
<sup>47</sup> Mukharjee, N. (1967). *Foreign and Inland Trade, 1833-1905 in "The History of Bengal"*. Edited by Sinha N. K., Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, p. 344

<b>QUINQUENNium</b>	<b>IMPORTS.</b>	<b>EXPORTS.</b>
1855-56 to 1859-60	938.88	1349.36
1860-61 to 1864-65	1555.47	1977.60
1865-66 to 1869-70	2144.14	2409.50
1870-71 to 1874-75	1648.61	2398.72
1875-76 to 1879-80	1879.71	2793.57
1880-81 to 1884-85	2149.63	3319.94
1885-86 to 1889-90	2343.62	3539.02
1890-91 to 1894-95	2673.55	4019.60
1895-96 to 1899-00	2846.25	4575.60
1900-01 to 1904-05	3695.69	5734.52



The above discussion makes evident, there was a school of thought that believed the expansion of railways was to blame for the rural economy's decline in India. This perspective holds that the extension of railway connections played a significant role in changing the conventional cropping pattern and the production relationships among peasants and artisans. Nilmoni Mukherjee, for instance, provided extremely clear explanations of how the British intervention in Bengali trade led to the modification of this production relationship. Bengal has huge, diverse economic divisions. This feature ran counter to the growing English manufacturing interest and the

prevailing economic philosophy of the time. To address these issues, the company and government tried a number of reforms that altered the nature of Bengal's international trade.<sup>48</sup>



The contrary Bengali and English narratives explored above lead to further questions regarding the complexities which introduction of railways generated. There is no denying the fact that establishment of railways was seen as a blessing for the people of Bengal. However Bengali narratives clearly reflect that the boon turned to bane soon enough. It appeared as if a haze was lifted and the Bengalis could clearly see the intent of their colonial masters. Nonetheless, for better

<sup>48</sup> Mukharjee N. (1967). *Foreign and Inland Trade, 1833-1905* in "The History of Bengal". Edited by Sinha N. K., Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, p. 367

or for worse the railways were here to stay. With time the train travel was normalised and changed the lifestyle and socio-cultural landscape of people.

This has been observed and also mentioned in previous chapters, that initiation of railways and creation of supportive infrastructure changed the socio-cultural landscape of not only Bengal but also India. The question here is to what extent this change was visible in the case of Bengal. On one hand, the narratives, whether in the form of literary expressions or official statements, display that railways emerged as an agency of change and brought diverse cultural and social groups on a shared platform. This in turn was able to override the notion of common identity, merging differences of caste, community and regions. On the other hand, there are viewpoints and observations that railways did not really bridge any gaps or create a more unified socio-cultural landscape. In fact, it highlighted one more distinction that found space in the form of the ruler and ruled i.e. racial discrimination.<sup>49</sup>

According to colonial administrators, the caste system frequently served as a symbolic abbreviation for nearly every problem in Indian culture. Proponents of railway travel asserted that it might subvert and eliminate the power of the caste system. The formula was easy to understand. By forcing individuals to interact closely in railway areas like stations and waiting rooms, it was thought that train travel would lessen prejudice generated by caste and religions. It was anticipated that these encounters would also foster other types of affinities, chief among them a sense of shared patriotism. Nonetheless, advocates of colonial railways were not the only ones who thought railways might change society. In response to Macdonald's predictions about the growth of railways and their implications for Indian society, a few elites from Bengal emphasised how sharing railway spaces would probably be beneficial for the disintegration of social norms, especially caste prejudices. One may argue that the ardour for steam among Indians (elite or not) may be seen as a genuine belief in the ability of technology in general and railways in particular to change society and alleviate its evils.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mukhopadhyay, A. (2018). *Imperial Technology and Native Agency, A Social History of Railways in Colonial India*. London and New York: Routledge p. 224

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86

The building of railways created employment opportunities for labourers, engineers, surveyors, masons, carpenters, and other skilled and unskilled workers. After the railways were built, a sizable workforce was needed to operate and maintain the railway system. Along the rail routes, towns and cities sprang up as a result of the construction of railway lines. These metropolitan areas developed became centres of trade, business, and government, creating jobs in a variety of industries, including services, retail, banking, and hospitality. Local workers received training in a variety of railway-related skills as a result of the introduction of new technologies and modes of transportation by the railways. As a result, technical colleges, training facilities, and workshops were setup, offering chances for professional growth and training. These job choices gave rise to the Bengali Babu class.<sup>51</sup>

The railways altered behaviour of society in a number of ways. It altered the way that people thought about time, punctuality, and discipline. Bengali literary tradition, especially prose and novels, illustrate that change. For instance, the daily routine of inhabitants of Kaharpara were regulated by the schedule of up and down trains<sup>52</sup>. The lives of the clerks, employed in railway workshops, were regulated by the whistle of the workshops. Buying tickets and riding the train at a certain time made people more disciplined.<sup>53</sup>

Travel in railways also has been believed to be life altering or empowering for women in general. This safer mode of travel barring few exceptions was able to break down social rigidity and enabled freedom to travel alone for women is another important development in society brought about by the Railways. In many of the compositions this development was believed to be instrumental in women being able to find themselves and to break the social taboos and share the same public space with other male members. Kalyani in *Aparichaita* by Tagore, the anonymous girl in *Namhara Swapno*, by Gajendra Kumar Mitra, as discussed in Chapter 2, showed her boldness while travelling by train, in front of male passengers that projected the sense of self-reliance and empowerment among Bengali women. Not only did railways give women the ability to travel

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<sup>51</sup> See Roy, D. C. (2001). *Devoganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's publishing; Ghosh, S. (1991), "*Bashpiya Rath O Railway Charit'*". kolkata: Ananda Publisher, p. 86

<sup>52</sup> Bandopadhyay, T. (1951). 'Hansuli Banker Upakatha', *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol-VII. Kolikata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, pp. 194-5

<sup>53</sup> Roy, D. (1984). *Devoganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata:Dey's Publishing, p.115

farther and faster and to some extent defy gender stereotypes, but also promoted mobility, enabling women to leave the house and participate in public life as well as acquire knowledge outside of it.

By connecting far regions together, railways provided Bengali people, scope to know the diverse cultures, languages, cuisines, etiquettes, political and geographical ideas and eventually by removing regional selfness people found unity in diversity and sense of 'oneness'. Ishwar Chandra Gupta's *Railgaadi*, can be seen as the best example for the above :

*Jalibe moner ghore ahalader alo / Eke eke dekha jabe jekhane ja bhalo.*

*ke probashi ke nivasi robe na probhed / Paraspar alapone dur hobe khed.*<sup>54</sup>

The light of happiness will lighten the mind/ Gradually, all will be feasible wherever things are better.

There will be no difference between expatriate and resident/ Through conversations with each other, the distance will be reduced.

(Translation mine)

All the verses mentioned above exemplify the opportunities that were provided by the railways and eventually reduced the gap among the provinces' and created the notion of nationalism.

The English narratives on the society of Bengal was shaped by chauvinistic considerations. They often portrayed Bengali society as inherently flawed or stagnant. People generally kept to themselves and didn't interact much with others outside their immediate circle. This balance was maintained by a mutual reluctance to engage with those outside their community, leading to a somewhat isolated and insular social structure. In that situation the narratives considered the railways, press, telegram, steam engine as new powerful agents that reconstructed Bengali society

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<sup>54</sup> Gupta, I. C. (1899). *Koler Gaadi*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta Gronthavali. Edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolkata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra, pp. 164-65

and economy.<sup>55</sup> As per colonial thinking, for any new structures to be entrenched, older ones had to disintegrate. It was expected that the traditional economic and social systems of village communities would be disrupted by the advent of railways. However, there was an assurance that it would be replaced by new structures and newer establishments. The English narratives argue that before railways, villages were often isolated from each other due to inadequate transportation infrastructure, such as roads and railways. This isolation limited interaction between communities and hindered social progress. However, promoting the railways, the narratives promised that it would alter this dynamic by facilitating increased communication and interaction among villages. As a result, the once self-sufficient and isolated village communities would experience a shift towards greater interconnectedness and social change.<sup>56</sup> In essence the English narratives vehemently favoured the transformative power of railways that played a crucial role in reshaping social structures and fostering connectivity in colonial India.

Imperialists such as Hardinge and Dalhousie and railway promoters such as Chapman and R. Macdonald Stephenson, for instance, assumed that railways may help in 'steam borne social progress' through their narratives.<sup>57</sup> They predicted that the Indian caste system, which served as a barrier to the country's advancement and power, will be eliminated by the modern industries brought about by the railway system. Moreover, it would create the conditions for the evolution of a modern-western type of society in India. Although few colonial people saw the railways as 'useless to the Hindoos', their opinions were not given much importance on the building of railways.<sup>58</sup> Immediately after the inception of railways in Bengal, Hindus promptly disproved that colonial notion by taking trains as their most favourable communication system. Their interest to travel by train, unavailability of required number of tickets, public amazement towards the train proved the acceptance of the train in daily life. Despite this, it becomes hard to imagine easy acceptance of the coexistence of people from different religious backgrounds within the same space. Literary genres like print media, novels etc, shows both the images of coexistence and

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<sup>55</sup> G. H. (1908). 'The Opening of the East Indian Railway'. *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol- II, No.1, January, 1908, p. 55-61

<sup>56</sup> Marx, K. (1853). *The Future Results of British Rule in India*, New York Daily Tribune, August 8, 1853

<sup>57</sup> Railway Minutes of Governor General, Lord Dalhousie, of July 4, 1850, & Minutes of April 20, 1853; Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*. Sreerampore: J. H. Peters, pp. 48-49;

<sup>58</sup> Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*. Sreerampore: J. H. Peters, pp. 48-49

supercilious mentality which has been shown in chapter two. There were separate waiting rooms for Muslims and Hindus at the various stations, even though the railways did not offer policies based on community or class within the trains. There were select young guys from specific groups who would have given water to tourists Muslim and Hindu passengers. This is why Sir Jogendra Singh's comment is significant: "*Its effects can be observed in the distribution of water at all railway stations, either as Hindu or Muslim water.*"<sup>59</sup>

Few narrations gave other views on the impact of railways as it connected the various regions of India. They laid the groundwork for contemporary nationalism as well as a brand-new middle class made up of businesspeople, journalists, attorneys, and other professionals. In actuality, the main mechanism that led to the fall of the Indian Empire was this growing middle class.<sup>60</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

A complex and multidimensional picture emerges from many perspectives presented in both Bengali and English narratives. Commercial and military interests played a major role in the motivations for the construction of railways in Bengal. The merchant class of Bengalis and Britons had a common passion in commerce behind the building of railways. Few attempts were made to depict the public facilities from a utilitarian standpoint, since the company and the British government had strictly militarial, administrative, and economic interests in it, with the public amenities being a byproduct. Building of railways facilitated British and European trade in and out of India to a great extent in which Indian merchant classes were engaged as brokers. Hence, nationalist historians viewed the railways as the instrument for the extortion of Indian economy and destruction of the indigenous trade and features of production relation. Both narratives provide us insights into how railways have altered Bengali society. Because of the common space that the train offered, social rigidity, hierarchy, community distinctions, and cultural prejudice began to be progressively eliminated. New job opportunities led to the emergence of new classes & social

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<sup>59</sup> Dutt, T. (1945). *Women of Modern India*. India: Oxford University Press, pp. 59-60

<sup>60</sup> Thorner, D. (1995). *The Pattern of Railways Development in India* in Building the Railway of Raj 1850-1900. Edited by Ian J. Kerr. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 201-02

groups, and new establishments. By sharing the common space, women—the most marginalised group in society—were given the opportunity to be brave and open-minded.

In conclusion, there is a wide range of viewpoints in the historical discourse on the significance of railways in colonial Bengal, which reflects the various interests and viewpoints of various groups. While the socio-cultural effects showed a complicated interaction between development and opposition, the administration of railways and its economic effects drew both acclaim and condemnation.