

REPRESENTATIONS OF RAILWAYS IN LITERARY TRADITIONS OF BENGAL:

1854-1947

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INTRODUCTION

The railways have garnered significant scholarly attention over time, with much focus on their economic and technological aspects. However, there has been limited exploration of their socio-cultural and literary implications, especially concerning Bengal. This study aims to address this gap by examining the impact of railways on Bengal's literary traditions. Throughout the colonial era, Indians grappled with various social, cultural, political, and administrative changes brought by European powers, which left enduring effects on Bengali and Indian society. This research delves into the ways Bengal's inhabitants responded to colonial discourse and adapted to the introduction of railways. It also investigates the role played by railways in reshaping of cultural norms; and the capturing of this transformation in Bengal's literary genres.

The advent of railways transformed, not only the socio-economic conditions, but also impacted socio-cultural spheres in Bengal. Everyday life, work patterns, and perceptions of space and time underwent significant changes. Rural landscapes, economic structures, production methods, human relationships, and social dynamics, all experienced perceptible modifications. Concurrently, railways became entrenched in Bengal's language and literary traditions. They acquired prominent space in contemporary newspapers, magazines, reports, and literary works, influencing poetry, prose, stories, and songs. The proliferation of novels, short stories, and travelogues set on trains or featuring railway-related themes reflects both personal interests and socio-cultural contexts of the time.

STUDY AREA:

The study areas of the current research are Bengali speaking regions of the Bengal Presidency in the colonial period.

Objectives of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understanding of impact of railways on socio-cultural life; and representations of railways in literary traditions of Bengal during colonial period. The main objectives are:

1. To study the attitude, views and reactions of the Bengalis towards the railway-transport through poetic response.
2. To identify the general and diverse reactions of the society in Bengal and the process of their adaptation with a new transport system, and the multiple ways in which it brought about socio-cultural changes in Bengal through novels and prose and other contemporary narratives.
3. To explore the reflections of railway-matters and problems in contemporary newspapers, magazines, journals etc in varied respects.
4. To look into other literary genres—, a travelogue to understand the acceptance of this new transport system by Bengali travellers and their joy and enthusiasm to explore new languages, cultures and new land landscapes.
5. To analyse Bengali songs, rhymes, folklore etc to ascertain the grass-root level societal assimilations of railways.
6. To have an insight into the different views and attitudes represented in both Bengali and English narratives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

As the main objective of this attempt is to study the socio-cultural and other relevant impacts of railways on Bengal through literary representations the study will be based on the data and information that have been collected from various sources as given below:

Primary Sources: Contemporary Government reports, census, manuals, yearbooks, gazetteers etc published by railways, have been explored to comprehend the railway policies of the British government behind the introduction of railways in India. Primary sources provided information about the development of railways in Bengal, their management, the conflicts that resulted from its' operations. These sources furnish data on working classes, the state's society, culture, economy, and brief public opinion towards railway systems.

Literary sources:

The Literary sources have been divided into two:

1. Bengali and English newspapers, journals, letters, magazines, reports and gazetteers like *Sangbad Prabhakar*, *Sadharani*, *Prabasi*, *Sambad Koumudi*, *Amrita Bazaar*, *Archchana*, *Gramobarta Prokashika*, *Bharati*, *Bharati o Balak*, *Bengal Hurkaru*, *Education Gazette*, *Friend of India*, *Saturday*, *Times of India*, *Hindoo Patriot*, *Bengal Past and Present*, etc. have been studied to explore the purpose and socio-cultural impacts of this new transport system, bilateral discussions over it, response of locals towards railways, difficulties faced by the railway-users etc.

2. Other literary sources like poetry, songs, short stories, novels, and articles have been studied to acquaint with socio-cultural transformations that occurred by the introduction of the railways. Folklore traditions have been dealt with to explore the root level impact of railways in the society of colonial Bengal. Travelogues, contemporary Bengali literatures and other rail related historical writings have been consulted to corroborate and draw a picture of socio-cultural impacts both in positive and negative perspectives.

3. Secondary sources written in both colonial and post colonial period have been searched to corroborate the facts to usher in historical aspects from the given colonial literary forms.

CHAPTER 1: Poetic Responses to Railways

The poetic portrayal of railways reflects on how Indians perceived and adapted to the changes brought by this novel mode of transportation. Initially, their reaction ranged from awe to eventual acceptance and integration of railways into everyday life. This evolution is evident in Bengali poetry, which often romanticised the railways and its impact on society. Through poetry, we delve into the attitudes, perspectives, and responses of Bengali writers towards the railways, offering insights into broader social and cultural transformations. Themes such as trains, railway infrastructure, and the behaviour of railway workers feature prominently in these poems, reflecting the widespread societal changes spurred by the advent of railways.

This examination delves into three separate perspectives on railways as portrayed in poetry. At first, railways elicited wonder, awe, and entertainment. As they became integrated into daily life, they symbolised romance and nostalgia. However, over time, they also became the focal point of various protests. For instance, Immediately after the advent of railways poets like Ishwar Chandra Gupta, Dinabandhu Mitra, Hemchandra Bandopadhyay, Mahananda Chakraborty, Jatindranath Sengupta, Krishnakamini Dasi depicted railways as bringing multifaceted benefits. They portray railways as a modern technological marvel which keeps them in awe and expresses gratitude towards it.¹ Gradually, after a few decades, railways became normalised and naturalised in day to day life of Bengal. It got room in Bengali rhymes which shows the wide acceptance of railways. Upendra Kishor Ray, Sukumar Sen and other narrators² depicts the influence of railways on the culture and society of Bengal. RabindraNath Tagore wrote many poems on this

¹ Gupta, I. (1899). *Koler Gaadi*, Iswar Chandra Gupta Granthabali, edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolkata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra; Mitra, D. (1929). *Nil Darpan*, Kolkata: The Book Emporium Limited; Chakraborty, Chintaharan, 1367 B.S. (c.1960). *Bhasha Sahitya Sanskriti*. Kolkata: Orient Book Company; Sengupta, J., (2001). *Jatindranath Sengupter Shrestha Kobita*, Kolkata: Gopimihan Singharoy, Bharabi' Sar, R. (2006). *Rail Unish Sataker Bangali Jiban O Sahitye*, Kolkata: Kamalini Prakashan

² Ray Chowdhury, U. (2012). '*Rail Gaadir Gaan*', A Collection of writing of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Kolkata: S.B.s Publication; Roy, S. (1920). 'Nacher Batik', *Sandesh*, Chaitra, 1327 B.S.

new transport system. Amongst these *Istation*, *Hothat Dekha* and *Rater Gadi* etc,³ are very famous in which romantic poetic responses could be found regarding railways. After normalisation many poets also show the other aspects of the railways. For instance, Kazi Nazrul Islam's poem 'Kuli Majur',⁴ which shows the revolutionary protest against the British railway officers and other elite class passengers who extort the 'porters' and 'working class' in a very inhuman way.

Romantic acceptance of the changes brought out by Railways, proves the adaptation of Railways in everyday life. " Understanding of such aspects enables one to become cognizant of the way in which the Railways had affected the entire structure of the society."

CHAPTER 2: Portrayal of Railways in Prose and Other Bengali Narratives

Prose, an essential genre in modern literature, reflects societal concerns and issues. Each literary era captures the spirit of its time. The introduction of railways in Bengal during the nineteenth century brought about a revolutionary change that deeply impacted society, as depicted in contemporary literary works, especially Bengali novels and prose. With the emergence of Bengali prose literature in the early nineteenth century, the arrival of railways in the latter half of the century provided writers with a new backdrop for storytelling. Consequently, railways became a prevalent theme in Bengali literary tradition, offering writers ample material to explore.

Following the advent of railways in Bengal, two significant publications directly related to railways emerged: "*Bashpiyo Kol O Bharat Barshiya Railway*" (1855) by Kalidas Maitra⁵ and "*Devaganer Martye Agoman*" (1869) by Durga Charan Ray⁶. While not traditional history books, both serve as valuable historical sources. These works provide insights into the introduction and expansion of railways in Bengal, societal attitudes towards them, and their impacts on the region.

³ Tagore, R. (2002). *Sanchayita*, Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy

⁴ Islam, K.N. (2001). 'Kuli Majur', *Kaji Najrul Islam Rachana Samagra*, Kolkata: Sachib, Pashchim Banga Bangla Academy, pp. 86-88

⁵ Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*, Sreerampore: J. H. Peters

⁶ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agamon*, Kolkata: Dey's Publishing

Additionally, novels like Ramapada Chowdhury's "Pratham Prahar" and Tarasankar Bandopadhyay's "Hansuli Banker Upakatha" depict the socio-cultural changes brought about by railways.⁷

CHAPTER 3: Adumbration of Railways in Print Media

Nineteenth century was the age of vivification of vernacular newspapers in Bengal which had been commenced with Christian missionaries. All these newspapers angered as well stimulated the Bengali mindset towards enlightenment. Railways and related issues occupied a considerable space in the contemporary print media like Bengali and English newspapers, periodicals, journals etc. Planning, proposal, trilateral discussion, future impacts etc were being published with due gravity from the very beginning. Responses and reactions of common people towards railways, incidents and accidents, problems faced by railways, molestation, various types of crimes were being published by the contemporary newspapers, periodicals etc. Print media, especially contemporary newspapers and periodicals and magazines ensured their active role to make the people aware about its utility and negative impacts like economic extortion, destruction of agrarian economy and small scale industries, degradation of environment, working class agitations etc. Hence, all the issues related to railways published in print media have been explored.

CHAPTER 4: Depiction of Railways in Travelogues

Travelogues are crucial to the process of reconstructing history. Humans have long been fascinated by travelling and distant locations. The Travelogues give us a thorough account of information about the political developments, the social climate, and the economic features of the inhabitants or empires. They also encountered a genuine report of a traveller's experiences while travelling by train, through which a holistic contemporary or previous socio-cultural, religious and economic scenario could be drawn.

⁷ Chowdhury, R. (1988), 'Pratham Prahar', *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol- 2, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers; Bandopadhyay, T. (1951). *Hansuli Banker Upakatha*, *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, vol. vii, Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers; Bandopadhyay, B. (1972), *Pather Panchali*, Kolkata: Mitra And Ghosh Publishers

During the colonial era, Bengali travelogues primarily recounted personal experiences, vividly capturing the many aspects of the new transport system. They delve into its rapid pace, remarkable mobility, construction endeavours, historical evolution, and administrative challenges. This chapter highlights travel writings that provide a comprehensive insight into the transformative impact of railways on society and culture, diverse landscapes, and socio-cultural practices. Before the advent of railways, Bengalis had limited exposure to travel beyond trade and religious journeys. However, these travelogues depict Bengalis, both men and women, embracing travel enthusiastically following the introduction of railways.

CHAPTER 5: Acceptance of Railways in Folklore Traditions

Folk culture typically represents the traditions and practices of a society during its various formative stages. The importance of examining folk culture in this context is underscored by the fact that the introduction of the new communication system had both material and cultural effects on it. The new transport system was highly influential in its appearance and activities. It affected people at all levels and their culture also. Folk traditions and grassroot culture has been explored to know the impact of railways and its acceptance even by popular culture. The folk songs, and folk verses of tribal people have also been dealt with to understand the influence of railways.

There are many folk rhymes, folk songs, tribal marriage songs, regional songs, riddles and spiritual songs that have been searched in which railways have been explored. All these genres considered railways as an important theme for portrayal. Railways brought about a transformation in society and culture, which was reflected in all of these genres. Via the prism of musical renditions (tribal and regional folk songs), the train has been shown as a medium of transportation that aided in India's modernisation and has also been simlized with a spiritual journey. Folk genres show how railways made life easier and better for the people of Bengal by bringing about new employment opportunities; connecting regions; transporting humans, materials, and ideas, which facilitated social improvements. The folk rhymes, riddles and folk songs did not hesitate to voice the adverse effects of railways such as-economic exploitation, haziness of the previously clear blue skies, sleep deprivation by the jarring sounds of the train, and the loss of forests that were sojourns of peaceful and spiritual retreat.

CHAPTER 6: Comparative study of Representations in Bengali and English Narratives.

As the narratives were written both in English and vernacular languages, the views and attitudes were also explained in divergent ways. A comparative study regarding the introduction of railways, its purposes, its management, its impacts on socio-cultural and economic consequences have been highlighted and examined to present a balanced view to the scholars. Both the Bengali and English literary traditions have been analysed to unearth the motives and justifications of conflicting views, attitudes and responses towards the railways.

For example, many English narratives explain the purpose of the construction of railways in India as social and economic progress. The railway system will be the forerunner of modern industry'. But at the same time many Bengali narratives like newspapers, periodicals and other literary traditions explained its purposes as entirely political and economical extortion.

KEY FINDINGS:

Literary representations show the multifaceted impacts of railways on society, culture, and the economy of colonial Bengal. From the very beginning, railways have occupied a significant place in almost every genre of Bengal's literature. Poetry, prose, novels, print media, travelogues, folklore traditions, and other narratives have embraced new themes to depict various aspects of railways. The introduction of railways, their developments, views, attitudes towards them, their purposes, impacts on culture, societal changes, the relationship between railways and nationalism, economic impact, environmental changes, and more have been explored in the context of colonial Bengal.

CONCLUSION :

It took a considerable period of time for the Bengali society to negotiate with the new system of transport and adjust to a wide range of transformations. This was reflected in the literary traditions of the region. The literary traditions were also experiencing a parallel influence in many dimensions which is the main theme of this research work. The attitudes, responses, views, adaptations and presentations etc. of railways have been uncovered in the study of literary tradition. The resultant social and cultural impacts have been brought forth and analysed. This would help enrich scholastic concepts and knowledge towards the socio-cultural influence of railways in Bengal.

Presence of impact of railway transport remains strong in many popular poetry to literary genres, and from vernacular newspapers to folk traditions. Station, yard, train compartment and other aspects of railways become the theme of imaginary writing which at the same time portray a socio-cultural picture of that time. Both positive and adverse reactions are reflected in all literary traditions. This smoky phenomenon, which is sometimes described as a monster, becomes a threatening element for disfiguring the natural landscape and violating nature and somewhere became the cause of economic extortions and working class agitations. At the same time some literary traditions represent it as a symbol of progress and cultural and textual heritage drawn out from numerous illustrations of literary traditions. It could be concluded that the new technology of travel and transportation has had an important role in the general transformation of modern societies, their ways of feeling, thinking and living.

Recomendations/ Suggestions:

The current thesis examines the impact of railways in colonial Bengal through literary representations. This study leaves scope for further researchers to conduct investigations of various other states or their own regions/districts to understand the impact of railways. Researchers could also explore how the introduction of railways affected the socio-cultural and economic aspects of their selected regions.

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