

Chapter 1

Poetic Response to Railways

The focus of the historical discourses so far has been on the experiences of the rulers or a select few who, through their extraordinary achievements, made it to the history books. Over time, this focus shifted to people's experiences. People's experiences become important as they present alternative or lateral perspectives. These perspectives render a discourse complete when added to the ruler's viewpoint. Since the introduction of railways, this new technological innovation has made an impression on society that has been expressed in multiple literary genres, including poetry. The poetic depiction of railways shows the way Indians viewed and responded to change. "Their response gradually transformed from an initial overawe to acceptance and eventual assimilation, naturalisation, or normalisation of railways in popular culture."¹ It is a known fact that the introduction of railways caused profound changes in Indian society in general and Bengali society in particular. The change has been perceived in a variety of ways. The overall social fabric of Bengal was affected by the railways. In a highly conspicuous fashion, it supported and linked intra and interregional land trade. It also exposed the economy to the ups and downs of colonial life. As a result, social and economic mobility significantly increased throughout the empire.² This mobility provided by the railways was observed by members of society. Many poems were written, showing how Bengali society interacted with this new, quick mode of communication. Bengalis have always been known as the race of poets, so when the railways were introduced, the hard metals of iron and steel were humanised by giving them a romantic hue in the poems. This chapter firstly, centres on the diverse responses of society since the inception of railways in Bengal. Secondly, it discusses romantic acceptance of the societal changes it brought about. The poems

¹ Vaidya, M. (2021). *Socio-Cultural History: Railways in Gujarati Literature and Traditions* in *The Railways in Colonial South Asian Economy, Ecology and Culture*. Edt. by Ganeswar, Nayak, Delhi:Manohar Pub, p. 336

² Awasthi, A. (2011). *Railways and Cultural History: A Study of Poetic Representations*. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 72, PART-I (2011), pp. 955-967

related to railways depicted state-wide social and cultural transformations. Trains, carriage-windows, rail tracks, platforms, bridges, yards, workers, ticket counters, and rail working-class behaviour became the themes of the poetry. A thorough evaluation of the literature on railways has been carried out to determine the social and cultural changes. Lastly, it also focuses on railways becoming centres of various-agitations, like the quick spread of diseases, the working class agitations, etc.

1. Railways a Technological Phenomenon: Theme of Wonder

History is replete with examples where people's experiences are often expressed through the pen of the poet. Such literary forms often reflect what people felt at the time. In this sense, it can be said that despite the words flowing from a poet's pen, they mirrored people's responses. Hence, the response of the people of Bengal—their attitudes and opinions regarding railways—found words in a variety of ways after the establishment of the railway system. In this literary genre, i.e. poems, the poet can communicate his/her visions and ideas, whether they are subjective or objective, which can occasionally represent societal ideas as well.³

From the beginning, the introduction of railways in Bengal was believed to be beneficial for people. A sense of amazement and gratitude towards this new mechanised transportation system is perceived in Bengali poems.

The information on the first train's start-up was widely disseminated. There was a fit of mania among the locals. Hundreds of people gathered on either side of the line to observe the oncoming fire carriage. Allegories such as – '*pagla haati (mad elephant)*', '*lohar ghora*' (iron horse), '*pushpak rath*' (aerial chariot), etc. were used by the public to symbolise a railway engine/train. They chanted *Hari bol, Hari bol* (divine expression) after seeing the train for the first time. Some prayed while holding their *vastra* (shoulder clothes) with two hands. This type of excitement and wonder was expressed in many Bengali poems. Ishwar Chandra Gupta (1812-1859) a very prominent figure in Bengali literature, also wrote poems on railways. A poet, writer, and editor of

³ Anonymous, *Samalochak Sankha Ghosh*, Chapter Four, p. 205, retrieved from https://ir.nbu.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/2812/10/10_chapter%204.pdf dated 28/03/2023

the Bengali newspaper *Sangbad Prabhakar* and an editor of the weekly magazine named ‘*Prabhakar*’, published a poem called ‘*Sharadwarnan*’ in *Sangbad Prabhakar*.⁴ In the poem, he ventures into recounting his joy and the passengers' experiences two months after the introduction of the railways in Bengal.

“...*Hoogllej'r jatri jato, jatra kori gyan hato,*

Kole chole sthale jole sukh....”⁵

All the rail passengers being joyous riders

in the engine-carts on land and water glades...

(Translation Mine)

The first time the railways ran between Howrah and Hooghly, passengers found it hard to believe that they had arrived at Hooghly in such a short time when it would normally take them a day to reach it. They were shocked after travelling by train for the first time. It took them a while to get back to their senses and realise what had happened. As a result of the machine-operated transportation, the poet said that bliss is now present everywhere.

“*Bari nohe boro dur, obilombe pay pur*

Hoy dur samudoy dukh”⁶

Destination is not far away all the pain goes away

people reach homes quickly cutting distance braids.

(Translation Mine)

⁴ *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 26th Oct. 1855

⁵ Gupta, I. C. (1855). *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 26th Oct. 1855; Gupta, I.C. (1919). *Swaradwarnan*, Ishwar Gupter Granthabali, vol. 1-2. Kolkata: Sri Satischandra Mukhopadhyay, p. 216

⁶ *Ibid.*

The poet further says that due to this fast communication system, the home was no longer far away. The passengers were quite pleased because it allowed people to travel faster and more efficiently. And thus, it gave them a sense of happiness and the ability to reach their destinations more easily. Train travel alleviates some of the difficulties and challenges of commuting over long distances. Nonetheless, the poet lamented for those whose homes were far away from the railway stations, as they had to face difficulties getting home by foot.

Ishwar Chandra Gupta also penned another poem, '*Koler Gaadi*'.⁷ This poem was the first to concentrate on the theme of railways.

“ki ashcharya railroad dekho dekho shobe

Bharate bharati tar ke shuneche kobe,

.....⁸

I wonder what a marvellous rail-roads,

People of India never heard these blurts,

Ishwar Chandra Gupta in the poem *Koler Gaadi*, mirrored people's reactions. It talks about how India became different after the introduction of railways. These verses highlight the inadequate Indian communication infrastructure, which the railways filled. The poet here described it as a machine-driven “steam chariot,” something that was unknown to the Indians. The miraculous vehicle that runs on a machine allows people to traverse six days' worth of distance in just six hours (*Choy dande chole jay choy diner path/ The carts run six days' path in six hours*).⁹ The poet expressed his awe at the way it would move. The human body doesn't uncomfortably sway with the movement of the train as it used to happen when they travelled in the bullock cart. The railway train also provided the comfort of free movement whether sitting, standing or walking in a carriage. (*Bosiya daraye chole pad thake sthir/ Eto druta chole tabu tole na shorir / Passengers sitting or*

⁷ Gupta, I. C. (1899). *Koler Gaadi*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta Granthabali. Edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolkata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra, pp. 164–65

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

standing in it yet the legs remain steady and mime/ It runs so fast, the body yet doesn't wave any more)

Before the development of the railways, the primary transportation networks were slow and tedious. Consequently, the railways accelerated mobility whether social or physical in ways that the poet himself could not have imagined. The train's rapidity never failed to astound the poet. He again wrote:

Kolete choleche gari nam bashparath

Choy dande chole jay choy diner path

The engine running car called by steam chariots

Run six days' path in six hours.

(Translation Mine)

Many literary compositions also focus on the benefits of railways in facilitating travel to sacred places. The culture of India has a long-standing but still widely practised tradition of pilgrimage to holy places. Bengalis were known to have travelled to Kashi, Vrindavan, Haridwar, and other religious centres in the hopes of attaining *moksha* (salvation). Before the advent of railways, thousands of pilgrims used to travel by boat, cart, palanquin, and occasionally on foot. It took them days to get there. Two poets, Rabindranath Tagore and Ishwar Chandra Gupta, have captured the scenes of pilgrimage but in different lights. In his poem by Rabindranath Tagore, *Devatar Grash* (Devoured by God), portrays a vivid picture of a group of pilgrims who travelled by boat, taking long time to arrive [*Grame grame sei barta roti gelo krame-/ Maitra mahashoy jabe sagar sangame tirtha snan lagi./ sangidol gelo juti kato bal briddha naronari,/ noukaduti prastut hoilo ghate*¹⁰ (Through villages far and wide, the tale did grow,/Mr. Maitra set forth for the sea's sacred flow./With youths, elders, and maidens in tow,/Two boats waited at the wharf, ready to row.)] He described the pitiful state of the pilgrims and writes about how on those long arduous journeys

¹⁰ Tagore, R. (1304 B.S./c. 1897). *Devatar Grash*, Kahini, Sanchayita. pp. 227-231

many pilgrims used to die from physical anguish/ natural calamities:

...Oti dur tir prante nil banorekha

Onya dike lubdha kshubdha hinshra barirashi

Prashanta surjasta-pane uthiche ucchashi

uddhata bidroha bhore. nahi mane haal,

ghure talomalo tori oshhnato matal

mudhashama. Tibra sheet pabaner sone

mishiya trasher him naronarigane

kanpaiche tharahari.....¹¹

The blue forest line is seen on the far shore

on the one side of the pilgrims' boat,

The lustful, angry and violent sea is arrogantly dancing in its euphoria

In the midst of the tranquil dusk on the other side.

The turbulent boat is beyond the control of its rudder

Like a drunk foolish man.

The tyrannical sea combined with fierce winter air

Is quivering the pilgrims in the boat.

(Translation Mine)

¹¹ Tagore, R. (1304 B.S./c.1897). *Devatar Grash*, Kahini, Sanchayita. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, pp. 227-231

Ishwar Chandra Gupta, expressing his delight writes about pilgrimage made easy with the establishment of the railway connection from Calcutta to Kashi, and other pilgrimages. Railways as a means of faster communication provided comfort to pilgrims' lives making it much easier than before. Railways as the better transport system 'considerably boosted' both pilgrims and pilgrimages.¹²

Besides facilitating easier travel for the pilgrims, the poems also were themed around representing how India was explored by the people while travelling by train. It brought exhilaration to the wanderlust folks who wished to travel to different locations. Across the enormous Indian subcontinent, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Dwarka to Dibrugarh, the railway network connected people and various regions. The 'Iron Horse' of the country united the entire nation into a single vein.¹³ Ishwar Chandra Gupta in *Koler Gaadi*, says that the light of joy will shine in the mind when one observes pleasant surroundings and endeavours (*Chamatkar dekhi ankhi melite melite./Kotodur pore giya dekhite dekhite/I behold wondrous sights, my eyes aglow./ It stretches far and wide, just a glance to show*).

He further says that the people by and large had remained unaware of the diversity of the Indian landscape and culture before the introduction of railways. But railways gave the opportunity to explore unexplored regions. (*Dilli jabo Agra jabo jabo koto desh/ Lahore Shiker deshe koribo prabesh/ I'll journey to Delhi, Agra, and far-flung lands, And venture into the realm where the Sikhs stand.*)¹⁴ The aesthetically pleasing mountains of this huge nation, the raging oceans, the isolated forests, the waterfalls dancing to the beat, and the crazy-flowing rivers throughout India were all scattered throughout the Indian landscape.¹⁵ The image of the real India with its variety of nature was first presented to the Indians after connecting the regions with railways.¹⁶ Railways therefore gave people cultural and geographical knowledge in addition to pace and mobility.

¹² C. Simon, & E. John, (1995). *Pilgrimages past and present: Sacred Travel and Sacred Space in the World Religion*, Cambridge: Harvard University Pres, p.147

¹³ Mitra, P. (2012). *Bharatiya Somaj Chitre Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil Pub, p.246

¹⁴ Gupta, I. C. (1899). *Koler Gaadi*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta Granthabali. Edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolkata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra, pp. 164–65

¹⁵ Mitra, P. (2012). *Bharatiya Somaj Chitre Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil publishers, pp. 246-47

¹⁶ Ibid.

Many poems also focused on the influence that railways had on interpersonal relationships. For instance, Ishwar Chandra Gupta is further hopeful and says that interpersonal relationships will improve, and cross-cultural exchange might be possible with railways as a new mode of travel. He reasoned that, due to increased mobility, there would be no difference between expatriates and residents. Easy travel from one region to another will create a melting pot where regional seclusion could be abandoned. He also writes about the conversations that railways would facilitate, which in turn would reduce the distance between two hearts.

The train journey also provides the opportunity for reciprocal interchange among multilingual passengers while travelling. People interact with multilingual tourists during the journey, which enables them to pick up new languages and concepts. During the reciprocal exchange of educational ideas, the pupils benefit from having fresh information.¹⁷

Chatrer hoibe nana bhashay chalana/Jekhane sekhane hobe vidyar sadhana.

Students will be fluent in different languages/ Everywhere there will be a pursuit of knowledge.

(Translation Mine)

It is a well established fact that the railways had served the British economic interests but it also aided Indian merchants and traders in operating their businesses. Following the start of the railway in Bengal, an increase in international trade in railway reports, statistical abstracts, and other government reports. It made domestic trade easier too, as can be seen from the following lines.

*Boniker banijyer bishesh kushal,/ Sahajei hobe sob manas safal.*¹⁸

Merchants' trades will flourish,/ Their dreams set afire.

(Translation Mine)

Another message the poet is trying to convey is that the regions were bound together by a network

¹⁷ Gupta, I. C. (1899). *Koler Gaadi*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta Granthabali. Edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolkata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra, pp. 164–65

¹⁸ Ibid.

of reliable transportation systems. This, according to the poet, was something that was not conceivable before the advent of the railways. Since the cost of transportation was low, essential commodities will be affordable. It would also maintain a regular supply of perishables to the general populace.

Edesh o desh hobe samuday haate

*Sulabh hoibe jaha proyojon jate.*¹⁹

All the remote places will be closer reducing time-span,

The scarce goods will be easily available to the people's hand.

(Translation Mine)

There were a few literary compositions that described various elements of railways that they felt were marvellous, and some expressed gratitude for having to witness and use the technology. For instance, an anonymous poet compares the flight of a bird with the speed and power of a train. He/She shows amazement at the power of the bird when it takes flight. However, the railways to him/her appeared to be more powerful than the bird. He says,

Pakhir pakhay

bolo koto bol ache

dekhiya koler gari har maniyache

Relrode bashporath kato druta chole?

*Koto bege goti hoy elektrik kole?*²⁰

Tell of the power in birds' wings unfurled,

But daunted by the machine car.

¹⁹ Gupta, I. C. (1899). *Koler Gaadi*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta Granthabali. Edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolikata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra, pp. 164–65

²⁰ *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 26th October, 1855

How swiftly the train on tracks does race?

And how fast the electric train keeps pace?

(Translation Mine)

Koler Gaadi of Ishwar Chandra Gupta, also celebrates the marvel of railways. For the Bengali people, the extensive railways were marvellous. There were a lot of rumours spread about this as well. The folks couldn't stop wondering how this wonderful technology was created. So the poet here discusses the joy and happiness brought by the railways into the mundane lives of the people. At the end of the poem, Ishwar Chandra Gupta shows his heartfelt gratitude to those who made this new invention possible. He writes:

Naba path naba rath, Ei Srishti jar

Kripa kori lon tini pronam amar.

I offer my humble gratitude to that very guy,

Who has made these great roads and cars, aye.

(Translation Mine)

By the late nineteenth century, the detrimental impact of British rule was gradually becoming apparent and were criticised by Bengali intelligentsia, yet, at the same time, they could not deny the benefits that the Bengalis gained from the introduction of railways. For example, **Dinabandhu Mitra**, in his famous literary creation, *Nil Darpan*,²¹ a poetic drama written in Sakabda 1782 (c.1860), criticised British rule, but applauded the technology used in the railways in his poem “*Railer Gaadi*”.

In short triptych *chand* (verse) Dinabndhu Mitra expresses:

Gor gor taratari,

choliche koler gaadi

²¹ See for details: Mitra, D. (1929). *Nil Darpan*. Kolikata: The Book Emporium Limited

Dharete nodeche badi janalay pore shari

*Ramonira dekhiteche.*²²

.....

So fast with the sound *gar gar* the machine car is running,

Houses, nearby, are swaying, wearing sarees and peeping the window

The women are watching.

.....

(Translation Mine)

In this poem, the poet explains the technology of how the train runs. He expresses his amazement at the mechanical apparatus –steam locomotive.²³ He describes how steam power was used for locomotion. At that time, the automated running machine—with its enormous size, steam-exerting capacity, and quick mobility—was a topic of discussion in many Bengali poems.²⁴ Dinabandhu Mitra also admired another technology which was brought by the British along with the railways, i.e. the telegraph lines. The following lines resonate the awe and wonder of the poet.

Kiba Taditer taar, hoiache subistar

Abonir onge haar, samachar anibar

*Nimeshete dhaiche.*²⁵

²² Mitra, D. (1872). *Railer Gaadi*, Dinabandhu Mitra Kabita Sankalan. Edited by Shri Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Shri Sajani Kanta Das. Kolkata: Published by Sourindranath Das, pp.49-50

²³ Fowler, G. L. (1906). *Locomotive Dictionary; an illustrated vocabulary of terms, which designate American railroad locomotives their parts attachments and details of construction with definitions and illustrations of typical British locomotive practice*. New York; London: Railway Gazette. pp.47-50

²⁴ For details see: ‘Swaradbarnan’, *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 26th October, 1855 ; Gupta, I. C. (1899), *Koler Gaadi*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta Granthabali. Edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna, Kolkata: Nutan Kolkata Jantra, pp. 164–65

²⁵ Mitra, D. (1872). *Railer Gaadi*. Dinabandhu Mitra Kabita Sankalan, edited by Shri Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Shri Sajani Kanta Das, Kolkata: Published by Sourindranath Das, pp. 49–50

Electric wires, like a necklace grand,

Span the earth, spreading news across the land.

In but a wink, they swiftly fly, bringing tidings far and nigh.

(Translation Mine).

He writes that the wires hanging on the poles placed on both of the railway lines were like garlands along the railway track. The wires were arranged with the poles so beautifully that it seemed as if the earth had been decorated with ornaments. They basically were telegraph cables used to connect stations and transmit railway-related news.

Durito hoilo dur, kaler bhangilo bhur/ Bandhur bhudharo chur, ekdine kanpur/ Pothikera jaiche [The journey's shortened, time's illusion torn asunder,/Across rugged hills, the traveller does wander./In just one day, Kanpur's gate they breach,/Distance conquered, within easy reach. (Translation Mine)]. Dinabandhu Mitra was fascinated by railways, as it reduced the distance and time of travel. The new transport system not only revolutionised the old communication system but also broke the barriers of the Bengali populace and made them think beyond the narrow confines of their spiritualistic frame of mind. The poet observed that the ruralistic lifestyle was also ruptured by this technological invention. The poet was also impressed by the capacity of the British capitalists to overpower the natural hurdles such as mountains by building the railways through tunnels and overbridges. This enabled establishing connections between the southern and northern Bengal traversing different and difficult landscapes-rivers, canals, swampy areas, hilly regions and flatlands. The following lines focus on the wonder that the poet expresses at the use of scientific method for constructing tunnels in support of railways through the rocky core of the mountains.

Padartha vidyay bole,

khodiye bhudarodole

Sudongo koreche kole,

tar modhye gaadi chole/

*Aparup dekhite.*²⁶

With the knowledge of Physics

excavating mountains

The tunnels were built

the train runs under it

It looks amazing.

(Translation Mine)

Once the surmountable mountains were vanquished the next step was the conquering of the rivers by building bridges. The poet was specifically impressed by the building of the Koilwar Rail Bridge. He says, "*Sone Nad Bhimakay, istaker setu tay/ kotibaddha shobha payrbhoyete gaadi jay/ devokirti mohite (translation).*" This spectacular two laned railway bridge was the longest bridge in the subcontinent spanning over 4726 ft.-wide Sone River. It was constructed in 1862.²⁷ and linked regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh in a single string. The poet felt that the bridge was constructed in such a manner that it appeared to be a garland adorning the river on which the train ran fearlessly while singing magnificent songs to the Gods of the earth.

Next, the poet turns his attention to the speedier transportation provided by the railways which brought faraway regions within easier accessibility. Kashi, Punjab and Madras according to the poet seemed like immediate neighbours despite them being located in different corners of the Subcontinent. He further says: *Aswagaje diye chai, hasite hasite bhai/ bombay nagare jai, pathe theme nai khai/ ki subidha hoyeche* (Giving up horse & elephant we are pleasantly going/To Bombay city, we take bath and food in the transport). People began their journey to Bombay and other places by train, abandoning the old modes of transportation such as the horse-drawn cart, elephant-drawn carriage, and other manual transports. Also, the poet anticipated the day when the development of the railway would benefit communities in India. [*Railer kalyane kobe mangal*

²⁶ Mitra, D. (1872). *Railer Gaadi*, Dinabandhu Mitra Kabita Sankalan. Edited by Shri Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Shri Sajani Kanta Das, Kolkata: Published by Sourindranath Das, pp. 49–50

²⁷ Bhandari R. R. (216). *Bridges: The Spectacular Feat of Indian Engineering By R.R.Bhandari*. retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20160305002840/http://irsme.nic.in/files/mmfiles/BRIDGES_RRB.pdf dated 18/2/2024

sadhan hobe (When shall fortune smile upon the railways' care, bringing auspiciousness with welfare?)] (Translation Mine)]. He looked forward to a time when all Indians would coexist peacefully. (*Bharater jati sobe, ekmot hoye robe,/ sumilone miliye* (All the castes/classes in India will agree on harmony). Since India was ethnically, linguistically and culturally divided for centuries before the British came to India, the poet envisioned a picture where this system of communication could bind the people of India into one nationality.²⁸

The hardships of the pre-railway journey were eliminated by this scientific advancement. So the scientific invention by human beings changed the stereotypical conception of the social life of Bengal as well as India as a whole. The archaic religious beliefs of those who lived in pits and the superstitious notions of rural culture were destroyed by this new mode of transportation. The traditional way of life of the Bengalis was shattered by Western scientific intellectualism. In a nutshell, the poet was amazed by the great inventions made by Western science, and he exhorted all Indians to get together to break long-standing societal stagnation by abandoning conventional ways of life.

Railways greatly influenced and overwhelmed the younger Bengali poets. **Hemchandra Bandopadhyay** (1838–1903) was only sixteen years old when the railways started in Bengal. Like other earlier poets, he was also overwhelmed with this new means of transport-the railways. His poem, *Railgaadi* was written in 1879 where he shows his amazement at the advanced technology that changed people's lives. He writes: *Eso ke berate jabe shigra karo saj / Dhorate pushpak rath enenche Engraj* [Prepare and hasten, those who seek to roam,/ British brought forth the Pushpak's chrome (here train)].²⁹ The poem begins with an invitation to Bengalis to take the train, as the poet considers it to be the wonder of the world. The poet similes it with 'Pushpak Rath'--chariot of Ravana, which had been gifted by his stepbrother Kuber, according to the great saga of Ramayana. The *Pushpak Rath*, according to mythology, was the most automatic air car with super

²⁸ Bhandari R. R. (216). *Bridges: The Spectacular Feat of Indian Engineering By R.R.Bhandari*. retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20160305002840/http://irsme.nic.in/files/mmfiles/BRIDGES_RRB.pdf dated 18/2/2024

²⁹ Bandopadhyay, H. C. (1879/1286 B.S.). *Railgaadi*, Kabitabali Vol. II. (1st edition), Kolkata: Ray Press Depository, pp. 63-69

speed during *Treta yuga*, which was also a wonder for that time.³⁰

The poet, Hemchandra Bandopadhyay further portrays the advancement in transport system and lauds its pace in the following verses:

Shigra utho twara kori,

Ba, bag talpi dhor;

Eneche Bajiye bashi,

Thang thang kashi

Bajibe ispat-bole

Chadibe nishan dole,

Quickly now, aboard the train,

with bags in tow,

Whistling flute announces its show.

The bell rings out its merry song,

Departing with a flag's wave strong.

(Translation Mine)

So he advises his co-passengers to hurry to catch the train with all their luggages. The train is whistling, ringing the bell, and sounding *thong thong*. Bandopadhyay, through these lines, urges the Bengali society to Bandopadhyay or else they would be left behind. Further the poet also describes life in a railway station in the following lines: an experience that was very new for him. He focuses on the changes that accrue as a result of the hustle and bustle of the railway station.

³⁰ *Valmiki Ramayana*, Abstract Translation by Rajshekhar Basu. (9th Edition), 1390 B.S. Kolkata: Shomit Sarkar, M.C. Sarkar and Sons Pvt. Ltd., p. 262

Till then, the pace of life was slow, and hence people had time to note the differences and be bothered by them. He portrays that since the regular usage of railways people more than often forget the differences of caste, class, or creed.

...Oi shuno ticketer ghore kiba gol

Manusher godi jeno thekathi kol.

Near the ticket booth, chaos brews, creating quite a stir,

A human mattress forms, laps connected, a sight to confer.

(Translation Mine).

Along with those new elements, he also portrays:

“Hanpayae Hanpaye chote

saree, dhuti, hat, kote

Theka theki chute jay

Keho kare na shudhay”

Passengers dash and pant in haste,

Sarees, dhotis, hats, no time to waste.

Untouchability ignored, no questions asked,

Forward they surge, in their tasks steadfast.

(Translation Mine)

Though the request for separate journey and sitting arrangements was lodged, the railway companies had no provision to provide that facility. The print media from time to time has noted to have requested the government and the railway companies requesting However, from the onset

the government as well as railway companies had maintained that it was not obligatory for them to honour the exclusive sitting arrangements in trains. For instance, in 1854, the chief engineer of the Madras Railway stated that it was not the duty of the railways to recognise caste divisions to offer one carriage for a *Brahmin* and another for a *pariah*.³¹ Left with no choice, the passengers became used to this new system.

Like Ishwar Chandra Gupta, Rabindranath Tagore, and Dinabandhu Mitra the poet also observes the improvement in pilgrimage experiences. Hemchandra Bandopadhyay praises railways for facilitating pilgrimages and enabling people to travel more frequently and further away. He charts a map through his poems of important religious destinations that connected the key urban centres such as Vaidyanath, Sitakunda, Bankipur, Gaya, Kasi, Proyag, Agravan, Mathura, and Vrindavan, which have been connected by railways. *In poet's language:*

Dekhite dekhite jabe

Sitakunda age pabe,

Kichu dur age tar

Bankipur -Gaya-dwar,

Danda kato jak jan

Pabe Kashi tirtha sthan,

Prayag, Ajodhya chari pabe Agrabon-

Mathura tahar pore hero Vrindavan.”

If you go to see by train,

You will get Sitakund first

³¹ Mitra, P. (2016). *Somajchitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil publishers, p. 106

A short distance before that
 There is Bankipur and the Gaya gate.
 After sometime of running of train
 You will get the Kashi shrine,
 After leaving Prayag and Ayodhya you will get Agraban-
 After that you will see Mathura and then Vrindavan.”

The poet not only mentions pilgrimages but also other religious places like Haridwar, Ganga Jhari, Puskar, Dwarkapuri, Narmada, Kaberi River, Krishna-Godavari, the Buddhist cave of Ilora, the bridge of Rameswaram, and so many other places which became very easy to visit due to railways.³² The poet felt that visiting all these places would lead to spiritual fulfilment. These experiences made him a reluctant supporter of British rule and urged the Bengalis to use this mode of transportation and travel across the country. *Dhanya re biman dhonya, Dhanya he Engrej* (Blessed be the train, blessed be the Englishman). Bandopadhyaya especially extolled the creation of a machine which controlled ‘time’ with discipline and speed. He believed that railways unified India. A sentiment which was expressed by other poets mentioned above.³³

Despite the praise heaped on the benefits accrued from the establishment of railways, the poet did hold some reservations. At the very end of the poem, the poet wrote: *Asur osadhya kaje sadhiteche jagote/ jode pran dite pare devero dorpete/ paro naki banchaite nirjib bharote?* (Asur/demon are accomplishing the impossible task in this world/ They can impart life to the lifeless arrogantly/ Who can save this inanimate India?) Here we can hear a different tone by calling the train ‘a demon’. “*The demon is doing impossible things in this world; God can give life to the lifeless, but can the people of India save the lifeless India?*” It is as if he is talking about lifeless India with a melody of sadness in his mind. He called on Indians to wake up and free India from the trap of

³² For more details: Bandopadhyay, H. C. (c.1879/1286 B.S.). *Railgaadi*, Kabitabali, Vol. II. (1st edition), Kolkata: Ray Press Depository, pp. 63-69

³³ Bandopadhyay, H. C. (c.1879/1286 B.S.). *Railgaadi*, Kabitabali Vol. II. (1st edition), Kolkata: Ray Press Depository, pp. 63-69

subjugation. The fear and fragmentation caused by the British colonial administration, restricted the freedom of Bengali people and separated them into narrow domestic groups. Here the binary opposition can be traced, where the poet is conflicted about progress at the political cost of subjugation.

The experiences of train travel were naturally difficult for the locals in its earlier phase. Acts such as buying a ticket and waiting for the train were also considered extraordinary activities and hence were equated with carrying out divine rituals. **Mahananda Chakraborty** in his poem “*Railpath Bhraman Barnana*’ writes of his experiences of journey by train from Shaktipith to Calcutta.³⁴

Dash ghonta ratrikale chadiye basati

Ishtishane shaktipithe karilo basati.

.....³⁵

Leaving the home, ten hours at night

Stayed at the station of Shaktipith.

After leaving the house, the poet had to wait at the station, which is used here in a metaphorical sense. It appeared to the poet that the passengers were sitting in a meditative pose, praying for a boon, concentrating on the sound of the ringing of the bell to take the ticket. The ticket here has been referred to as a *Barpatra* (*bar*-boon and *patra*-letter). After the bell went off, buying the ticket by paying money (*pronami*) was considered as an offering given in the temple. The entry of the train into the station had been compared to the descent of a fuming and seething Goddess Parvati. The passengers were depicted as devotees of the goddess. The poet mentions that at the arrival of the train, the passengers folded their hands in reverence welcoming it. The goddess (train), being satisfied by the obeisance, allows them to board and gives them a boon of a safe journey. The disciples (here passengers) also wanted the goddess to shower her blessings on the magical mechanical entity (train) for eternity. The poet expressed his wish that the trains would last forever

³⁴ Chakraborty, C. (1367 B.S. /c.1960). *Bhasha Sahitya Sanskriti*. Kolkata: Orient Book Company, pp.136-44

³⁵Ibid. pp.136-44

and the train journey has been analogized to the attainment of nirvana. The poet also focuses on the speed of the train when it sprinted through the dark night and within three hours (one *prahar*), crossed Burdwan. It reached Howrah station in ten hours, crossing Vaidyavati, Farashdanga, and Srirampore.

Many other poems were written at the time discussing different aspects of either trains or travelling by train experiences. For instance, **Jatindranath Sengupta** (1885-1933) in his poem *Rail Ghum* (Train Sleep) enumerates how his sleep is disturbed by the unpleasing sounds/noises (chugging, chuffing, rumbling, and screeching) created by the moving train.³⁶ He also wrote another poem "*Junction Statione*" where the train made him question various aspects of the phenomenon of 'love'.³⁷ Love as an emotion in the context of railways has been explored by the poet.

Krishnakamini Dasi a prominent writer/poetess in nineteenth-century Calcutta. In her poem, "*Birahinir Ullash*" (Joy of a Deserted), she depicts how railways benefitted lovers or married couples who had been separated and could not be with each other for longer periods. She heaps praises on the Englishmen who introduced this new marvel which enabled the lovers to meet. Bengal, under the administration of the British East India Company, became the centre of western education. Many English-educated Bengalis had to live abroad or far away from home, leaving their families for the sake of employment. So here the poet expresses the sorrow for the deserted women, whose husbands were reluctant to take leave to visit their homes, due to fear of a deduction from their salaries. So their wives, yearning for a glimpse of their beloved, awaited like a Pied Cuckoo. Though after a year they could meet each other for a very few days, they had to return, leaving their better halves again estranged.

Satato prabashi pati,

abeshe na hoy gati

chirodin achen sekhane

Ekdin pele chuti,

kamai hoibe kuti

³⁶ Sengupta, J., (1956). 'Rail Ghum', *Jatindranath Sengupter Kobita Sankalan*. Kolkata: Bha Publishers, pp.41-47

³⁷ Sengupta, J., (2001). 'Junction Statione' *Jatindranath Sengupter Shrestha Kobita*. Edt. by Sushanta Basu. Kolkata: Gopimihan Singharoy, Bharabi, pp. 111-16

.....³⁸

Husband abroad, always far away, Obsession won't do, that's what they say.

Forever distant,

Even on a day off's call, Salary deducted, if from work we stall.

.....

(Translation Mine)

But due to the introduction of railways -

Ekhon dubela pabo, mon sadh puraibo,

Hobena Bicched jwala aar

.....³⁹

Twice daily now, my wish I'll acquire,

No more separation's painful fire.

.....

(Translation Mine)

The trains greatly increased the happiness of couples by eliminating all the suffering that those wives had been going through due to their separation from their husbands due to long-distance travel. The male partners could go home regularly because of the quicker rail transportation.

³⁸ Sar, R. (2006). *Rail Unish Sataker Bangali Jiban O Sahitye*. Kolkata: Kamalini Prakashan, p. 79

³⁹ Ibid

Finally, Krishnakamini Dasi has praised and thanked the nations and individuals who converted the impossible into achievable on behalf of those women who had been pining for their husbands' companionship. Krishnakamini Dasi also paid tribute to the mothers whose sons created this new, faster mode of transportation. Through these poetic responses, it is very clear that the elite, educated class in Bengal welcomed the introduction of railways as a sign of progress and modernity. They saw railways as a symbol of technological advancement.

Another poem written by Krishnakamini Dasi titled, "*Jomer Krandan*" (Yama's Cry) is an ode to the challenges that the railways offered to orthodox societal norms.

The poem '*Jomer Krandan*' is written in long rhymes:

Dekhe railway gaadi/ dhulay dhusar podi

Jamraj godagodi dey hay hay re.

.....
Koreche ashchorjo kol,/ bol matro dhona jol,

Pavana bege dhay hay hay hay re.⁴⁰

Seeing the train on railroad lies as grey in the dust

The regent of deaths(Yamraj) tumbles wallows on the earth, alas!alas!

.....
An amazing invention with only steam force

Runs at the speed of the wind, I wonder, wonder.....

Lord Yamraj in the poem represents the orthodox society which resisted change and complained

⁴⁰ Sar, R. (2006). *Rail Unish Sataker Bangali Jiban O Sahitye*. Kolkata: Kamalini Prakashan, p. 80

about it. He expressed his helplessness at the introduction of railways. He lamented to God Prajapati that his rights have gone, due to this wonder machine whose force is only water vapour while it runs as fast as wind. *Eki hero ashombhob, ekdine jabe sob/ Masadhik pathe tay hay hay hayre*. It has done the impossible—the path that took a month to go now takes only one day. Yamraj also expresses his worry about the degradation of the morality and values of society. *Sekhane maran hole, mahakale mantra dile/ Kailashe nibash tar hay hay hayre*. The Bengali populace had their firm belief that if they could reach Kashi, they would get a place at Kailashdham after death. Earlier, travelling to Kashi was hazardous and arduous, thus, the attainment of salvation was difficult. But with the introduction of railways, it became very easy to reach Kashi, within a few hours. If the ultimate object of life and after-life can be achieved within a flash, then its importance and dignity would be reduced. Yamraj was scared that if Kashi was easily available, the people would do more wrong. If the sinner gets a place in Kashi, then both the sinner and saint will have to stay together. Then the role of Yamraj to judge the souls of the dead depending on their deeds, becomes redundant, as everyone will effortlessly reach Kashi and get rid of their sins. Yamraj is perturbed that chastisement for evil deeds will not be meted out to sinful humans. The people will reach Kashidham before death by riding this faster vehicle, and there everyone will be freed by the effect of the *Mahakal Mantra*.

2. Integration and Acceptance of Railways Through Bengali *Choda(s)*

The following section focuses on '*Choda*' (rhymes), a subset of poetic representations. Like the poems, '*Choda*' also reflects social changes at an intrinsic level, and provides insight into the cultural and societal norms of a particular time period. As language and societal values evolved, so did the words and themes that were used in '*choda*'. Researchers can gain insight into the attitudes and beliefs of a society and discern their changing patterns with the passage of time by analysing the language and content of *choda*. For example, in the English language, where nursery rhymes are often passed down from generation to generation, they reflect the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the society in which they were created. Similarly, *choda* has also been composed in Bengali and has originated in the pre-modern times, when it was used as a means of disseminating news and information, as well as in past history. It was believed that in pre-literate societies,

people's experiences were recorded through oral tradition.⁴¹ *Choda*, as a part of that oral tradition, were further developed in literate cultures, creating a deep-rooted impact on shared cultural understanding and memory. When a rhyme becomes popular and widely known, it often shapes how people perceive and understand certain social transformations. *Choda(s)* were also written by individuals. Famous Bengali litterateurs like Upendrakishore Roy, Sukumar Roy, and others are credited with composing many *choda* on railways. A few of their *choda* give us socio-cultural aspects of railways.

Upendrakishore Ray (1863–1915) created a large number of *choda* and tales for Bengali children that both piqued their interest in reading and presented the values and social morals of the era in which they were written. His very famous *choda* is '*Rail Gaadir Gaan*'/ *The Song of Train*:

Thanag thanag baje ghonta,

Amra sobai railer gaadi... ⁴²

Knock knock knock knock the bell rang,

We are all rail carriages.

This *choda* describes the experience of a train journey, as seen from the perspective of the train. The "Knock knock knock knock bell" refers to the sound of the train's bell or whistle. The train is personified as a group of railway carriages, urging passengers to hurry towards home with their luggage and tickets. The train promises to deliver passengers to their destination without delay. It then describes the sounds of the train's engine, which include the "*po po bhak bhak! Bhakt bhakt bhakta bhakta.*" The train boasts of its speed and power, likening its engine to a "machine horse." Despite its strength, the train is content with a simple diet of water and coal. It can cover great distances in a short amount of time, passing the "path of the month" in a single day. The *choda* concludes with the train urging passengers to "come quickly," as there is not much time. It encourages them to head towards home, where they belong. The *choda* also shows the wonder of

⁴¹ Roy, A. S. (1985). *Choda Samagra*. Kolkata: Banishilpo, p. 9.

⁴² Ray Chowdhury, U. (2012). *Rail Gaadir Gaan*. A Collection of Writing of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Kolkata: S.B.s Publication, p. 920

modern technology and its speed.⁴³

Another *choda* titled ‘*Madhupurer Chithi*’ (Letter From Madhupur) is also regarding riding the Rail.

Railer je sabuj gaadi, tate chilo ek buri-

Jalar moto mota ar koylar moto kalo

Bose chilo sob dheke tai tar bhitore theke

*Baire kichui dekha jechilona bhalo....*⁴⁴

In the green train, an old woman was there-

She was obese like a pitch and black like coal

Wrapped up tight, hidden from sight,

Nothing revealed, all was hide.

(Translation Mine)

The poem is a recollection of a train journey, where the narrator is travelling in a train consisting of green and white carriages. Initially, the third and fourth-class train compartments had one or two windows, which were very small and had no benches inside, so passengers had to sit on the floor. Nothing was visible to the squatting public. Here the poet is picturing the situation when nothing could be seen from inside the train, so he changed the carriage later. The first and second-class carriages were cleaner, airier, and more comfortable to sit in. After changing to the white compartment from third class, the narrator can peep out the window and observe everything.

Sukumar Ray (1887–1923), son of Upendra Kishore Ray and father of Satyajit Ray, is known

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ray Chowdhury, U. (2012). *Rail Gaadir Gaan*. A Collection of Writing of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Kolkata: S.B.s Publication, p. 926

for his *choda* for children. He wrote a very interesting limerick “*Nacher Batik*”⁴⁵, which narrates the impact of a train on the life of a railway inspector, who had suffered in numerous train derailments. Thus, the train inspector obsessively internalised the habit of jumpiness which mimicked a dance. The poet very aptly uses the *choda* to describe the plight of the rail inspector. Through the *choda*, the poet portrayed the frequent rail accidents that had plagued the railways at that time.

The safety and care of the passengers has also been expressed in other literary genres as well as. A very interesting limerick has been composed by **Rabindranath Tagore** on railway-related train catastrophes. In this limerick, he expresses his desire for the trains to be operated in total safety. Rabindranath advised the train not to "stump" while travelling. In this limerick, he depicts the rail accidents and writes:

Gaadite moder pipe chilo tero-choddo,

*Engine e jol dite dilo bhule madya.....*⁴⁶

Thirteen or fifteen number drums of wine were in the train,

That wine was poured instead of water, by mistake.

(Translation Mine)

If the train derails and spills onto the paddy field, it also destroys the crops in that area. Both passengers and other people outside the railway were in danger. Tagore blames the train's drivers and not the engine. The poet appears to have used the term "alcohol" in the context of the accident to highlight the carelessness of the engine driver. This increases public awareness of the train crash.⁴⁷

Over time, all these *chodas* became a part of the cultural fabric of Bengali society, shaping how people thought about and reacted to the changes brought by the railways. They helped to establish

⁴⁵ Roy, S. (1920). 'Nacher Batik', *Sandesh*, Chaitra, 1327 B.S. (c. 1920)

⁴⁶ Bhattacharya, A. (2002). *Rail Bhramane Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers, pp. 61–62

⁴⁷ Ibid.

new social norms and values that reflected the impact of the railways on society. As a result, these *chodas* played a role in shaping the intrinsic level of social change through the railway journey, its structural evolution, and accidents in colonial Bengal.

3. Railways and Romance as Depicted in Select Bengali Poems

Railways were closely related to the life of Rabindranath Tagore and therefore his writings contained his experiences that he had during his train travels. Although at the beginning he was warned by his nephew Satyaprasad who told him dreadful tales about travelling by rail. He said, "*Riding a train is a dreadful crisis without special skills. There is no more security if the foot slips. Then, when the automobile starts driving, one must sit down with all of their body's strength; otherwise, the shock is so terrible that nobody can tell where they fell.*"⁴⁸ However, when Rabindranath Tagore travelled for the first time at the age of eleven years and nine months, the train became his favourite mode of travelling. For him, using the train meant more than just getting to his destination—it meant understanding the significance of the railway itself. Rabindranath saw the train as a beautiful metaphor for escaping the confines of human civilization and reaching the boundless. As a lifelong rail traveller, the train carriage in his later years became a recurring theme in his poems. He produced a series of outstanding poems on train carriages.

The railways have either been mentioned repeatedly in his poems, prose, letters, and memoirs or have become instrumental in enabling his writings. An example of the latter can be discerned from Rabindranath's well-known drama-poem *Chitrangada* which was the result of thinking while travelling by train. In 1914, during the Durga puja holidays, the poet travelled to Gaya Bihar. Writing aboard the train was nothing new to the poet. He wrote Geetali's song, "*Pothe Pothei Basa Badhi Mane Bhabi Potha Furalo,*" (I make home on the way, assuming that the way is coming to an end.) while travelling from Gaya to Bela. He was so inspired by his journey that he wrote in the waiting room of Bela station, another well-known 'Pather Gaan' - '*Pantha, tumi pantha joner sokha he,/Pothe cholai sei to tomar paowa/jatrapother ananda gaan je gahe/ tari konthe tomari gaan gaoa.*' (O the way, you are the companion of the traveller,/ Travelling on you is getting with you./Who sings the joyful songs of the way/ I praise you in his voice.) Another song was written

⁴⁸ Bhattacharya, A. (2002). *Rail Bhramane Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers, pp.12-13

on his return journey, titled "*Pather Sathi, Nomi Barambar.*" (O companion of the way, I bow to you again and again.)⁴⁹ Thus, railways provide space and time to think and stimulate the poet's mind to create different genres of literature.

Rail travel had become a learning experience for Rabindranath Tagore. According to him, rail didn't just transport people to their destinations; it not only fulfilled the needs of people, but it also gave them great happiness and mental stimulation to create. He considered the 'windows' of the train as giving both physical as well as mental enticement to express oneself. From his various letters and memoirs, there are many examples of opening the window of his mind to express himself in poetry by visiting the outside scenery through the window of the train. A letter from Rabindranath to Nirmal Kumari captures his thoughts on this matter. On March 2, 1930, on his way to Madras by train, he wrote:*Outside the window, the convergence of my two eyes does not stop. When I see an incredible idol of sweetness through the window in the month of sunny Fagun, I know for sure that it will disappear. I ask my mind if this perception is completely an illusion. The mind does not accept it. What I see is not my joy alone - It is not the fancy of a man or madness, I am seeing it for all the people - I will go but the people will not go.... Our lives are moving forward like a train. But what I am getting from it is not temporary, it is eternal. I collected the sight of those who have seen so long and will see forever.* Rabindranath Tagore also wrote a poem along the similar lines. '*Sunil Sagare shyamalo-kinare/ On the green edge of the blue sea/ dekhechi pathe jete tulana-hinare/I saw the non-comparison on the way.*'⁵⁰ He saw the railways as closely related to life. Rabindranath saw not only the world and human life through the window of the train carriage but also the mood of the world sitting in the railway compartment, in his various writings.

Apart from 'windows', the 'train carriage', auxiliary stations, platforms, ticket agents, passengers, etc., have been the subject of his compositions/poetry such as *Shyamali*. There are three poems titled '*Banchita*', '*Apaprpaksha*' and '*Hothat Dekha*' in this poetry which depicts many aspects of railways. The poem '*Banchita*'⁵¹ tells the tale of a female who is going to meet her lover at another

⁴⁹Bhattacharya, A. (2002). *Rail Bhramane Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers, pp. 51-52

⁵⁰ Bhattacharya, A. (2002). *Rail Bhramane Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers pp. 54

⁵¹ Tagore, R. *Banchita, Shyamali*. Retrieved from <https://www.tagoreweb.in/Verses/shyamali-108/bonchito-1869>

station. Tagore with his flair for poetic representation creates a vivid picture of a young woman, who leaves her house at the behest of her lover, who unfortunately fails to meet with her. The rhyme represents the mind and heart of a woman as she attempts to break social norms and find herself. While describing her travel journey, Tagore creates a scene displaying life as it unfolds on the train.

The poem above showcases numerous life illustrations, including a girl heading to a convergence; the train's erratic movements; a newlywed couple travelling together and displaying joy that is incredibly unusual in Bengali culture; a message about pollution (*Ude ashche kolyar guro, keboli mukh mucchi rumale/* coal-dust are flying, I am to wipe my face with handkerchief); a scene where the station becomes a marketplace for local goods (*Kono ek station e banke kore chana eneche Goylar dol/* In one station, milkmen have brought cottage cheese); and a picture of the busiest Howrah station and its bridge, etc.

Through his poems, Tagore is able to create a vivid picture of a society where two lovers are unable to meet due to societal and circumstantial reasons. In the poem '*Aparpaksha*', a young man who had planned a rendezvous with his lover at Howrah station but he failed to meet her because he was detained at home due to family issues. He was further delayed because of a roadblock due to a bullock cart blocking the way of the oncoming traffic. In this poem the bullock cart was symbolised as bad luck. He finally reached the railway station but his lover had left. He saw the train as empty without his lover and compared it to a skeleton.⁵² However, the young couple could not meet at Howrah station but in Tagore's another poem '*Hothat Dekha*' they meet eventually after a long time.

During the early period, women were hesitant to board the train along with male co-passengers but gradually, after a few years, as it has been described in the poem '*Banchita*', female passengers travel alone. In the poem *Hothat Dekha*, the girl calls her male co-passenger to sit by her side, reflecting the boldness of society. Even the narrator himself said: "*Mone holo kom sahosh noy*" (It seems she has no less courage). It takes courage to talk with a male passenger on the train. Male and female passengers had to travel together on railways, which gave the latter the opportunity to

⁵² Tagore, R. *Banchita, Shyamali*. Retrieved from <https://www.tagoreweb.in/Verses/shyamali-108/bonchito-1869>

grow in confidence more than before. In the sentence “ *Somaj bidhir path gelo khule*”/ Social buttresses are broken, the poet shows the breaking of social taboos and societal buttresses created by the then-social leaders to protect women from the touch of unknown male contact. Here, Tagore presents the progress of society as ‘bold’ rather than ‘progressive’. Through the travel of a young woman, the poet here describes society as liberal and progressive. This poem also becomes a symbol for the expansion of a woman’s sphere of influence, her freedom to travel alone, and her bravery to interact with people of the opposite sex. It represents one of the first attempts to change the old patterns of society.⁵³

Here, ‘*Banchita*’, ‘*Aparpaksha*’ and ‘*Hothat Dekha*’ from the same poetry ‘*Shyamali*’ seem to be a sequel of a love story centred around railways, which proves the intrinsic level of acceptance of the railways in the lives of Bengali people. The poems reflect that the romantic acceptance of the changes brought about by railways, proves the adaptation of railways in everyday life. “Understanding such aspects enables one to become cognizant of the way in which the railways have affected the entire structure of society.”⁵⁴

Railway stations have also been used as a literal platform to launch many stories via the medium of poetry. It was transformed into a theatre where the characters of the poem performed their individual parts or served as a representation of society as a whole. Tagore was incredibly intrigued by how human behaviour developed and was drawn to the sociological ties in a newly typified public place.⁵⁵ Some people get down, some people get off the train, some people travel alone - through these, the poet discovered the deep inner meaning of life. In the world of his thoughts, that type of thought has been expressed in the poem “‘ইস্টেশন’”⁵⁶ (*Station*)

“ইস্টেশন”/ “*Station*” is written by Rabindranath Tagore describes the speaker's experience of a railway station, where Tagore observes the comings and goings of passengers and reflects on the

⁵³ Awasthi, A. (2011). Railways and Cultural History: A Study of Poetic Representations. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 72, PART-I (2011), p. 961

⁵⁴ Vaidya, M. (2021). *Socio -Cultural History: Railways in Gujarati Literature and Traditions* in The Railways in Colonial South Asian Economy, Ecology and Culture. (Ed.) By Ganeswar, Nayak, Delhi:Manohar Pub, p.334

⁵⁵ Awasthi, A. (2011). Railways and Cultural History: A Study of Poetic Representations, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 72, PART-I (2011), p. 961

⁵⁶ Tagore, R. (2002). *Station*, Nabajatak, Sanchayita. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, p. 557

transient nature of life.⁵⁷ Trains running from station to station day and night, and there was a small crowd of people and the carriages are full. Some of the trains rush passengers and go to the south, some to the north. The daily movement around the train shows how the train became one of the most essential means of daily transport. At the same time, the poet turns attention to himself and reflects on his own mortality. The picture of the busy station has been compared to the stage of a human being on earth.⁵⁸

Mancho tale donde pole bhir joma hoy koto

Patakata dey duliye ke kotha hoy gato

.....

Dhong dhong beje othe ghonta,

Ese pore bidayer khonta

Many a people gathered under the platform within few minutes

Many passengers missed the train when the flag is wave

.....

The bell ring resembling *dhong dhong*

That reminds to bid good bye

(Translation Mine)

The poem describes a scene at a train station, where people are gathering around the platform and waiting for their train to arrive. The first line of the poem says, "Under the stage, how many gather

⁵⁷ Tagore, R. (2002). *Station*, Nabajatak, Sanchayita. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, p. 557

⁵⁸ Ibid.

around within minutes," which refers to the platform of the station, where the train tracks are located.⁵⁹ He feels that, like the passengers at the station, he too is waiting for his time to depart. Overall, the poem seems to capture the hustle and bustle of a train station, and the feelings of excitement, anticipation, and uncertainty that people experience as they embark on a journey. Thus his life became a night train, '*Rater Gaadi.*'⁶⁰

The railways, used as a metaphor in poetry, represent the system's widespread use by society and locals. In the nineteenth century, railways were a matter of wonder, but in the twentieth century, railways became more normalised and naturalised and became inextricably linked with people's lives and thoughts, as evident by their acceptance in poetry as both metaphor and simile. Railways gave Tagore the room, time, and motion he needed to think, and they also served as the inspiration for his poem, in which Tagore begins his poem by comparing his life with the train running at night. He speculates about the passengers in the carriage and their potential destinations. He muses on how rapidly time goes and how similar our lives are to a carriage travelling towards an unknowable destination as it passes by.⁶¹

Chalay je naam nahi koy

Keu bole jantra se ar kichu noy

Manohin bole tare, tabu ondher haate

Pran mon shopi diya bichana se pate

Bole se anishchit, tabu jane oti

Nishchit tar gati.

No one says his name who runs it

Some say he is a machine, nothing else.

⁵⁹ Tagore, R. (2002). *Station*, Nabajatak, Sanchayita. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, p. 557

⁶⁰ Tagore, R. (2002). *Rater Gaadi*, Nabajatak, Sanchayita. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, p.560

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 560

And is designated as lifeless and blind,
 Yet people make their beds in it surrendering themselves
 It is inert, yet it knows very well
 Its speed certainly.

(Translation Mine)

The poem then takes a melancholic turn as Rabindranath Tagore realises that life is short and we must make the most of the time we have. He laments that we are all like passengers in the carriage of time, hurtling towards our ultimate fate. Here, he says the journey of life has a driver whose identity is unknown, like a train whose driver is unknown to the passengers. Someone says he is a machine, nothing more than that, yet we surrender ourselves without knowing him, just as we surrender ourselves when we sleep at night in the train carriage without knowing our certainty, only certainty is its motion. Overall, "*Rater Gaadi*" is a poignant meditation on the transience of life and the importance of living each moment to the fullest, which has been used as a simile. which indicates the naturalisation of the new fast transport system in the depths of life.⁶²

Fanki,⁶³ is a coming of age poem from the collection of poems titled, *Palataka*, written by Rabindranath Tagore based on the experiences of a young woman. Binu, a twenty three years old married girl was unwell and she was advised to spend a few days in a place with more agreeable weather. She embarks on this life changing train journey both metaphorically as well as literally with her husband. Here the train becomes the main component of the poem around which Binu finds herself a new purpose in life "Today suddenly *dharitri* (earth) catches all the light that fills her sky", as "Binu's two big eyes with a thin face are like a new good sight for new people" as the universe is alone today and she is only of this world as the cosmos is welcoming her with its full of light. In the train, she gets closer to her husband. From across the rail line she empathises with the beggars and gives them as much money as she can. She realises that if she can not remove the sorrows of people around her, the joy that she is feeling will carry the burden of sorrow and will

⁶² Tagore, R. (2002). 'Rater Gaadi', Nabajatak, *Sanchayita*. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, p.560

⁶³ Tagore, R.(2002). 'Fanki', Palataka, *Sanchayita*. Kolkata: published by Shri Ratan Roy, p. 384

not be joy any more. She wants to make this journey for the welfare of the universe. At the end of the poem, she becomes very sympathetic for a porter's wife, who was begging for help for her daughter's marriage. Binu requested her husband to help her with whatever they had during travelling time. The story shows kindness and magnanimity on the one hand and the poor condition of the porters on the other.

The poem explores how the railways impacted the lives of the people in general and Binu in particular. Through Binu, Tagore depicts how this new mode of travel touched people's lives. It also establishes connections between mainstream histories and people's histories, especially those of marginalised sections of society. Tagore makes railways a catalyst to speak of the emotions of a non-historical actor. The railway is portrayed in the poem as a representation of hope, connecting people and places while bringing joy to those in need. Binu, leaving behind her mundane life, performs extraordinary acts. The railway served as a conduit for Binu to hear about other people's tales, such as that of Rukmini, the wife of a railway porter who was forced to quit her village with her husband because of the oppression of the landowner. The strength of empathy and interpersonal connection that the railway provided, demonstrated by Binu's willingness to hear her tale and provide financial support.

The poem also highlights darker aspects of society, such as the caste system, the oppression of the zamindar class on the economically and socially backward classes, and negligence and insolence of lower caste people. Binu's rebellion against such practices and her willingness to help the downtrodden, further illustrate the railway's role in promoting social justice and equality.

Overall, the poem portrays railways as a complex yet essential element of modern society, connecting people, places, and stories. It suggests that the railway can provide opportunities for growth, empathy, and philanthropy while highlighting the importance of justice and equality.

4. Naturalisation of Railways: Tracks of Tension

Poetic representations of railways were not always positive or of awe and wonder. There were many Bengali poems that also depicted the dark side of railways. For instance, directly or indirectly, the content of many poems did focus on people's trepidation at the use of modern

machinery, a lack of expertise in its proper implementation, or even a lack of manpower in the management system, its mechanical flaws, improper behaviour of railway employees, train accidents, etc. These only added to the problems faced by common people due to the exploitation of colonial rule. One poem addressed railway wrecks, the conventions around them, the unfair treatment of the victims, and local reporters. There was a horrific accident that took place in Shyamnagar, which was articulated in the poem written by an anonymous poet. This poem explores how Pyaricharan Sarkar's life as the editor of the *Education Gazette* was impacted by this tragedy.⁶⁴

Loke bole pachsho manush gaadi chode molo

Dhum Dham dekhe tar commission holo.

.....

Fush fash sob hoye gelo commissione er ray

Majher theke Hindoo Patriot thekilen day.

Jahok kichu amod hobe ei ghatonay

*Kintu education becharir keno dharmo jay.*⁶⁵

People say five hundred people died while travelling by train

An investigating commission was pompously framed

.....

The commission declared a ridiculous result

Like 'The Hindu Patriot' was responsible of it

⁶⁴ *Amritabazar Patrika*, 2nd July, 1868

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Anyway, some fun came out of it

And the editor of 'The Education' lost his job.

(Translation Mine)

Accidents like the one mentioned above have been happening in Bengal ever since the railways were started.⁶⁶ This took place on 9th May 1868 and was the deadliest accident since the inception of railways. Several people were killed in a head-on collision between a passenger train and a mail train. '*Amritbazar Patrika*' (a daily) wrote an article with the details of this terrible accident.⁶⁷ '*Hindu Patriot*' also published the statement of an eyewitness who gave an account of the accident that occurred on that day at Shyamnagar station.⁶⁸

The poem also portrays another episode of Pyaricharan Sarkar, an editor of the '*Education Gazette*', who investigated the accident personally and gave the correct death toll. He was publishing the report truthfully and therefore had to face contempt and threats. The then Governor General of Bengal requested that Pyaricharan not publish the facts. Pyaricharan however, favoured resignation rather than publishing false data.⁶⁹

As colonial masters, the government favoured railway companies, even when they were wrong. An untitled poem written by Umesh Chandra Majumder portrays the persecution of the railway clerks. Majumder was an assistant accountant under the assistant engineer of the East Indian Railway Company at Taljhari, under the Rajmahal subdivision. He writes

⁶⁶ Bengali daily and monthly newspapers such as *Sangbad Prabhakar*, *Sambad Bhaskar*, *Prabashi* etc, published railway report since 1906 on accidents on regularly.

⁶⁷ Collision had occurred between a down passenger train which was coming from Kustia to Calcutta with an up mail train from Calcutta to Bagula on 9th May, 1862. Due to the carelessness of the point man, the mail train left its own line and went on the track of a passenger train. The mail train was going at full speed then, hence, an unfortunate accident occurred. Seven or eight compartments, full of passengers, were stuck behind the mail engine and were crushed. About five hundred people on both trains were killed and injured. The head constable did not allow the news media to enter the station when he heard the news. And it was heard that the railway authorities came to Shyamnagar and secretly threw a large number of dead bodies into the water of the Padma by the night freight train.

⁶⁸ *Hindoo Patriot*, 18th May, 1868

⁶⁹ *Prayas*, a Bengali Monthly Magazine 1899, 1st year, Vol-1. pp.756-57

Railway resident engineer er,

Officete karma kori, odrishter fere.

.....⁷⁰

In the office of the railway resident engineer.

I work by virtue of my bad luck.

(Translation Mine)

The poem was written in 1858, and at that time the construction of the Rajmahal railway line was going on. Many Bengali clerks and local tribal people were employed to work on the project there. The line would connect Kashi, Allahabad, and Delhi with Kolkata.⁷¹ During this situation, the poet was working on the railway project from Burdwan to Rajmahal. The poem conveys the mental and social conditions he was going through. As an assistant accountant, he was always worried that the calculation would never go wrong and be disclosed to anyone. The term ‘reverser fortune’ demonstrates that he would feel pressure from upper-level officers. The clerical agitations and railway working class movements from the first half of the twentieth century prove the inhuman behaviour of the officers of railway companies, which has been discussed in Chapter 3. The social condition of the clerks due to the work pressure has been demonstrated here by the word “beheaded”, fear of getting fired. Except for the account, he had no social life to communicate with other friends and relatives due to his fear of discussion and arguments with friends, which could impact his accounting. ‘*Ki kori chakuri kori na korile noy*’ demonstrates the helplessness of the employees of railway companies, which also demonstrates the poor socio-economic condition of Bengal.

The poem, besides presenting the darker side of railways, also becomes an important source of information to understand the urbanisation of Bengal in the modern historical period. For instance, he gives the history of the Rajmahal and describes the Taljhari area where he was staying. Besides

⁷⁰ *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 21st Jaishtha, 1263 (C. 1856)

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

this, the poem also focuses on the pathetic condition of people, which was the result of the exploitative nature of British rule. Poetic representations also depict various challenges that the people of Bengal had to face when railway lines were being built. For instance, East Indian Railway Company workers and employees had to work in challenging circumstances where they had to deal with dangerous situations—attacks from wild animals. The construction of dams, bridges, and embankments to build railway lines over mountains, rivers, canals, and swamp areas meant obstructing the natural drainage systems. This often resulted in water stagnation and mosquito infestation, which led to outbreaks of various diseases, such as malaria and others. An elaborate discussion has been done in Chapter 3. This negative effect of railways has been alluded to not only in newspapers and government reports but also in a poem by a Bengali village dweller.

“Railway bistar onya malaria hetu

Banga deshe iha jeno bhim dhumketu.

.....

Atayeb malaria janme sekhane

*Railroad eiroope malaria aane”.*⁷²

Another main cause of malaria is spread of railway

In Bengal it is terrific danger

.....

Therefore, malaria comes there

Where railroad introduced.

Translation Mine

⁷² Dey, S. (2013). *Medinipur Jelar Janaswsthya*. Thesis paper, (Ph.D.) submitted to Kalyani University, West Bengal, chapter 7, p. 27

The poem portrays the deleterious effects of railway expansion in Bengal, particularly concerning the spread of malaria. The poem describes how the construction of railways led to the stagnation of natural water flows in various regions. Though the authority constructed artificial systems to ease the out-flow of water, that was not sufficient to clear the stagnated water. The accumulated water and waste material in these areas became a breeding ground for mosquitoes, which led to diseases such as malaria. Numerous government reports, news reports, health reports, and contemporary opinions have been discussed in Chapter 3 regarding the spread of malaria due to the building of railways. In that regard, the poem conveys crucial information on the spread of malaria.

Another vital change to be debated and voiced in a poetic response is class struggle. Albeit the pace, capacity, and mechanical aspects of railways awed the contemporary literary mostly, their consequences upon the working class divisions were found in poetic expressions a little later.

A few years after the commencement of railways in Bengal, there were so many agitations raised within the working class. One such agitation has been found in the poem of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the romantic and revolutionary poet, now the national poet of Bangladesh. He wrote a poem titled "*Kuli Majur*"⁷³ in the support of porters and workers of railways who were being tortured by colonial and elite class people.

The poem reflects the working-class uprising in Bengal and throughout the world, especially in light of the transportation industry. The poem begins with the incident where a gentleman pushes a porter down, which caused tears to well up in the poet's eyes (*Sedin dekhinu raile,/ Kuli bo'le ek babu sa'b tare thele diloe niche fele!/Chokh fete elo jol,../ I have seen on the rail*). The poet wonders if this is how the weak are treated everywhere in the world (*Emni kore' ki jagat judiya mar khabe durbal?*). The poem reflects on the advancements made in transportation, with motors on the road, ships on the sea, and steam trains on the railways. Human labour made it possible for all this material advancement. The poet is illustrating how technology, capital, goods, and labour were the driving forces behind social and material advancement. Labourers (in this case, human

⁷³ Islam, K. N. (2001). 'Kuli Majur', *Kazi Nazrul Islam Rachana Samagra*. Kolkata: Sachib, Pashchim Banga Bangla Academy, pp. 86 -88

ones) are inexorably entangled in productive relations. They have always been oppressed and tortured. In the poem, the poet also depicts the two social classes that are based on capitalism and the production relationship: the elite class, also known as the proprietor class, and the working class. In this instance, the poet raised his voice in support of the oppressed workers who toiled long and hard. The poet makes a comparison between the workers and the well-known mythological character Dadhichi, who sacrificed his life for the gods. The Gods made thunderbolts from his bones and returned to heaven. Material progress depends on the labour of workers. India's terrain ranges from a rocky, to a marshy environment. The railways were built by cutting through mountains, building bridges over swamps, and constructing dams. The porters and other working classes were the most significant components of these production relations, aside from the capital. All these advancements have been made possible by their tireless effort. Still, the working class remained neglected and oppressed by the upper class. The poet here challenges the idea of societal hierarchy by mentioning, "The elite class came and rode the train, and the porters fell under it." By mentioning, "The wealthy sleep on the third level while the workers always remain below," the poet depicts class conflict. In this instance, the poet raises his voice in protest against this class disparity and urges everyone to work together to defend their rights. His poem depicts the revolutionary opposition against British railway officers and other affluent travellers who extort the "porters" in a very inhumane manner. He expresses anxiety over the new equipment being hauled by humans. He makes a prediction that the good days will soon return in order to make up for all of these extortions and tortures.

The poem suggests that the struggle of the working class is universal, and their contribution to society should be recognized and celebrated. Such discontent was evident among the various Indian employees, working for the railway company within a few years after its inception. The history of the continuous class struggle for the rights of the workers is still shining before us. Overall, the poem highlights the exploitation and suffering of the working class in Bengal and calls for social justice and equality.

Conclusion:

The aforementioned literary portrayal of railways forms the cornerstone of Bengal's cultural

acceptance of this new mode of mechanised transportation. This acceptance is observed on different levels: Firstly, many of the poems, discussed above, applauded the introduction of railways in Bengal. Some of the poems focused on how the people of Bengal began to rely on the railways to carry out both their daily activities and their long-standing cultural practices. Some of the poems also discuss the way trains started to dominate Bengalis' lives, and hence impacted social development. Secondly, there is an intellectual embrace of train culture, which reflects the significant adaptations that society experienced. The Bengali poems reflect that many pre-colonial socio-cultural structures exhibited signs of disintegration due to the scope provided by the railways. Thirdly, the poems also denote that the railways were not always seen as a boon. It brought along newer problems such as the spread of new diseases which was concurrent with the expansion of the railways. Fourthly, many poems drew the attention towards the haughtiness of the British which subjected the working class to various kinds of oppressions. Indirectly, however, it proved beneficial as it instilled class consciousness and a sense of their rights. It also facilitated the initial development of the railway working class.