

CHAPTER 2

Portrayal of Railways in Prose and other Bengali Narratives

The introduction of the railways, a revolutionary phenomenon, had left a remarkable impact on Bengali society. This has been reflected in literary genres of the time like Bengali novels, short stories, drama, and other narratives. The establishment of railways in Bengal and the evolution of modern Bengali literature were simultaneous processes in the nineteenth century.¹ Modern literary genres enthusiastically embraced the portrayal of railways, showcasing their growth, the evolving attitudes towards modernization and colonialism, and their impact on the socio-cultural fabric of Bengal.

1. The History of Railways -Chronicled in Bengali Narrations:

The development of railways in Bengal during the colonial era had a significant impact on the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the region. This has been extensively explored in Bengali prose and other narratives. Kalidas Maitra, Sukumar Roy, Sukumar Sen, and other writers narrated the historical growth of the construction of railways.

Everyday surroundings and humdrum become a mundane part of life. However, when we experience something for the first time, it leads to excitement and gives a certain tempo to earthly life. For example, when the poor man who first went out on the streets of England with an umbrella over his head, was chased by everyone throwing stones at him to the point that the poor man was struggling for his life.² When Sir Walter Raleigh introduced the potato and tobacco, he still had to face many unpredicted challenges. It is given to understand that one day he was sitting comfortably in his room smoking tobacco with the 'pipe'. His servant feared that his master's face was on fire. Not knowing what to do, he took a bucket of water and poured it over Sir Walter's head. In the same way, before the building of the Howrah Bridge, the construction of the pillars of the bridge

¹ Sen, S. (1943). *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Barddhaman Sahitya Sava, p.157

² Roy, S. (2009). 'Rail Gaadir Katha', '*Sukumar Rachana Samagra*'. Kolkata: Shubham Publication, p. 683

by floating the bow on the boat baffled the people beyond their imagination. This was so strange to the people at that time that even the newspapers made various jokes about the man who planned it. But later, thousands of people were passing by the pillar every day without any comment.³

Railways as a mode of travel also was naturalised and normalised in the course of time. However, in the initial phase, people responded with fear and trepidation. Soon, they adapted to it, and the litterateurs started to write about tracing its evolution. The details on establishment of railways is well known but this section attempts to reproduce the Bengali version as was written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Bengali non-fiction prose. '*Bashpiya Kol O Bharat Barshiya Railway*', for instance, written by Shri Kalidas Maitra, gives a chronological history of the invention of the steam engine and railways. According to Maitra, the Marquis of Worcester in England first initiated the invention of the steam machine, although he did not succeed. In 1698, Captain Savery again attempted to make the steam engine, and he was quite successful.⁴ It was huge in shape and was used to pump out water from mines. He wrote a book on it as well. Again in 1705, Thomas Newcomen, with royal patronage, started to rebuild the steam machine with the use of a huge cylinder and piston. Later, James Watt made it successful in a wider way. With this steam engine, Stephenson invented a railway carriage, which was used first to carry coal from mines to mills.⁵ During the first half of the 19th century, George Stephenson proposed to transport people by using steam-powered carriages. There were so many objections to that proposal that it gradually built up in Parliament. After much wrangling at the end, Stephenson was cross-examined and then permitted with a remark, "Well, let's check out your train!" George Stephenson was determined to make it possible. When he was working in a mine, he persuaded the owner of the coal mine and tested his first engine in 1814. Within a year, two other better engines—were developed. The carriage that ran first on the line in September 1825 at the cost of Rs. 4,00,000/- per mile. Gradually, the demand for the engines made by George Stephenson increased.⁶

³ Roy, S. (2009). 'Rail Gaadir Katha', '*Sukumar Rachana Samagra*'. Kolkata: Shubham Publication, p. 683

⁴ Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*. Sreerampore: J. H. Peters, p.6; Awasthi, A. (1994). History and Development of Railways in India, New Delhi: Deep and Deep publications, p.4

⁵ Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Kol O Bharatbarshiya Railway*. Sreerampore: J. H. Peters, p.6

⁶ Roy, S. (2009). *Rail Gaadir Katha* in '*Sukumar Rachana Samagra*'. Shubham Publication, Kolkata, p.683

Bengali prose writers also focused on the establishment of railways in India. An article titled 'Puratan Prasanga' published in the journal 'Archana' in 1911, traced the evolution of railways in India. The article said that the railways were introduced in India, 28 years after their introduction in Britain with the running of the first train from Stockton to Darlington in 1825.⁷ Further the author informs that, the first train in India ran from Mumbai to Thane on April 16, 1853. At the time, there were three first-class, two second-class, and three third-class compartments, and one brake van for the guard. The first passenger train from Howrah to Hooghly started on August 15, 1854. The response of the people was overwhelming, as almost a thousand people came to buy tickets, and there was no space left to carry all the passengers.⁸ The distance between Howrah and Hooghly was 23.25 miles. There were two trains a day. One train left at 10:30 a.m., and another train departed at 5:30 p.m. Trains departed Hooghly at 8:23 a.m. from Howrah and at 3:38 p.m., respectively. The train fare to Hooghly was three rupees.⁹ This article points towards the keen eye of the author to articulate such a detailed narrative of the first train operation in Bengal.

Another prose *Railer Paa Chali* explained the growth of railways in Bengal. According to it, in 1855, the line was extended up to Raniganj for the purpose of collecting coal to run all kinds of steam engines (railways and shipping) inside and outside India. The line, known as the main line, was extended from Khana to Mughalsarai along with the river Ganga. The prose further explains that many years later, a railway line was built from Sitarampur station on the Raniganj line through hilly tracts and forests to Gaya and from there to Mughalsarai. As a result, the distance between Howrah and Mughalsarai was further reduced. This new line was called the grand chord line. A huge bridge over the Sone River was built for this line, which was initially considered the longest bridge in the country. On the other side of Mughal Sarai, the first railway line was built from Prayag to Kanpur along the Yamuna River. Then this Allahabad-Kanpur line went to Ghaziabad, near Delhi. Meanwhile, this line runs from Mughalsarai across the Ganges to Delhi via Kasi, Lucknow, and Moradabad. All these lines were constructed by the East Indian Railway Company, which connected Bengal with almost the whole of the northern part of India. Sukumar Sen, in his

⁷ Mukhopadhyay, H. 'Puratan Prasanga', *Archana*, (1911). p. 436; Awasthi, A. (1994). *History and Development of Railways in India*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep publications, pp. 4-5

⁸ Mukhopadhyay, H. 'Puratan Prasanga', *Archana*,(1911). p.436

⁹ Sar, R. (2012). *Rail: Unish Shataker Bangali Jeeban O Sahitye*. Kolkata: Dey's Publication, p.23

prose, narrated the growth of railways in Benegal and very aptly talks about the exploitation of Bengal's natural resource of coal. This also points towards the fact that the railway lines were constructed with priority, connecting areas of commercial importance to the colonialists.

As per the narrative given in *Railer Pa Chali*, the second phase of railway construction commenced from Sealdah via East Bengal up to North Bengal. The Eastern Bengal Railway between Calcutta and Ranaghat in Nadia district was opened to the public on the eastern side of the Hooghly River on September 29, 1862. By November 15 of the same year, the construction had been completed up to the Poradah junction and its further expansion to Jagati was commissioned in November 1862. From Jagati junction, the line was next extended up to Gualundo in Faridpur district in January 1871. The line from Poradah via Santahar and Parbatipur to Jailpaiguri was opened in 1926. Later, it was further extended from Jalpaiguri to Siliguri. In 1885, the Jubilee Bridge, which was constructed on the occasion of the golden jubilee year of Maharani Victoria, connected the East Indian Railway with the Eastern Bengal Railway, which was a remarkable day in the history of Bengal Railway communication.¹⁰ Afterwards, other lines, such as the Cooch Behar Railway, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, the Assam-Bengal Railway, the Bengal Dooars Railway, the Bengal -North Western Railway, and the Bengal-Nagpur Railway, connected almost the whole of Bengal and other parts of the country as well. In this phase, it seems that Sukumar Sen's description of railway extension is as good as any other official report of railway construction in Bengal and gives valuable insights into the regional economic history of the time.

1.1 Bengal Provincial Railway - A Bengali Initiative

The importance of discussing the construction of this railway line as per Bengali literature is to highlight the way Bengali writers perceived the entrepreneurship of Bengalis in an adventurous new field of technological investment. Bengali prose like *Kolikata Darpan*, *Raler Paa Chali*, *Banglay Bhraman*, *Choto Railer Checker Babu*, and the entrepreneurship narratives and stories inform us of numerous other narrow gauge lines that were opened in Bengal in addition to the

¹⁰ Sen, S. (1990). *Railer Pa Chali*. Kolkata:Ananda Publishers, pp.11,13 & 17; *Statistical Abstract relating to British India from 1840 to 1865* (First number), pp. 26-27

broad gauge rail-lines. Bengal Provincial Railways and Light Railways have been mentioned in many of the narratives and therefore become crucial from a historical and socio-cultural point of view. According to Ramapada Mitra, the Bengal Provincial Railway Company was incorporated in 1890. Babu Amritlal Roy established this limited liability company in order to construct a railway line which was designed by Babu Anand Prasad Roy, a Bengali railway engineer. The railway's opening was authorised on December 18, 1891. The company's consulting engineer was an Englishman named F. C. Robertson, who was also the chief engineer of the East Bengal Railway. The length of the Bengal Provincial Railway was 41 miles. The first leg, from Tarakeswar to Magra, was 31 miles long; the second, from Magra to Tribeni, was 2 miles long. The total length of this line was 33 miles. The distance from Dasghara to Jamalpur Ganj was 8 miles. The unique feature of this line was that it was totally financed and managed by locals during construction and operation.¹¹ The Tarakeswar Magra line's segments from Tarkeswar to Bosua and Bosua to Magra were inaugurated on November 7, 1894, and March 8, 1895, respectively. The work of maintaining and operating the railways was continued by Ramakrishna Mukherjee.¹²

Sukumar Roy, in his book, *'Railer Paa Chali'*, says that towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Bengal emerged as a centre for nationalist activities, leading to the growth of nationalist sentiments amongst the intelligentsia as well as the common people. Manifestations of nationalism were reflected through the establishment of initiatives such as Swadeshi soap factories, Swadeshi cloth mills, railways, etc. A mention should be of a special effort to run a national, i.e. Bengali-funded and Bengali-managed railway. This wish of Bengalis was fulfilled with the establishment of the Bengal Provincial Railway. The railway extended entirely within the Hooghly district, from Tarakeswar via Magra to Triveni. This metre gauge line made some of the first gains in passenger transport, but as there were no industries, profit from carrying freight was negligible. The profit from the transportation of paddy and hay was also fairly insignificant, despite its less or no dependence upon industries. Its problems were amplified in 1916 with the operationalization of the Howrah Burdwan chord line of the East Indian Railway.

¹¹ Mitra, R. (1980). *Jogajog Byabastha: Railpath*, Kolkata Darpan, Vol. 1. Kolkata: Subarnarekha Publishers, p. 216

¹² Ibid. pp.197-246

Daily passengers of the Bengal Provincial Railway over to a new line called Howrah Burdwan chord-line which was started by East Indian Railway Company. The Bengal Provincial Railway authorities filed a complaint against the East Indian Railway Company holding them responsible for not only their losses but also for drawing away the passengers. This resulted in them getting a compensation of Rs 20,000 per year by the East Indian Railway. For a few years, the Bengal Provincial Railway sustained itself. Around 1935, it suffered further losses due to the increased instances of ticket evasion. As a result, it was no longer possible to operate it, and Bengal's first national railway line was abolished.¹³

1.2 Light Railways:

The history and significance of light railways in colonial Bengal are closely tied to the region's economic development and British colonial policies during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Light railways, also known as narrow-gauge railways, were introduced in Bengal to facilitate transportation and promote economic activities in various parts of the province. Many Bengali books and articles were written on light railways. For instance, the literature during that time focused on the Howrah - Amta light railway, Howrah- Sheakhala light railway, and Barasat-Basirhat light railway, which were the popular light railways at that time.¹⁴ The people of Bengal had many memories regarding these light gauge lines.

Radharaman Mitra vividly describes how light railways had an impact, and they weave a descriptive narrative around it. Light Railways had their socio-economic impact more vividly in the minds of the people of Bengal. The light rail system in Bengal was managed by Martin & Company. To develop the railway from Howrah to Amata, the company was founded on May 2, 1895.¹⁵ Howrah Municipality, Hooghly District Board, and Howrah District Board entered into a deal with Martin & Company. The Howrah Amta light railway was constructed between 1895 and 1908 in phases. The route from Howrah was built via Telkolghat, Domjur, Baragachia, Maju, and Amta, totalling 28 miles of railway track. By 1908, a branch of the line from Baragachia had reached Champadanga as well. The line was extended from Baragachia to Jagatballavpur and then

¹³ Sen. S. (1990). *Railer Paa Chali*. Kol: Ananda Publishers, pp.17-18

¹⁴ Ibid. p.14

¹⁵ <https://archive.ph/20120714085533/http://irse.bravehost.com/IRHTML.htm>, retrieved on 19/07/2023

to Atpur. On June 19, 1895, Martin & Company set up the Howrah-Sheakhala Light Railway as a company. Three sections of the Main Light Howrah Sheakhala were : i) Kadamtala to Chanditala, ii) Kestarampur to Chanditala, and iii) Shiakhala to Kestarampur. By the year 1898, the railway was complete. The Barasat Basirhat Hasnabad Railway was the longest of these three lines. This line was 32.9 miles in length and was opened to traffic in 1914.¹⁶

Small, narrow gauge railway lines proliferated quickly in Bengal alongside broad gauge railway lines and as feeder connecting chords. The three lines, i.e. i) Kadamtala to Chanditala, ii) Kestarampur to Chanditala, and iii) Shiakhala to Kestarampur belonged to Martin & Company and McLeod Russel & Company, were significant among all the narrow gauge lines. These lines were laid at a low cost with small guaranteed capital. Numerous trains operated by these private companies marked India's golden period of light railways up to the country's independence in 1947. These trains became a vital part of modern communication for the inhabitants of Howrah, Hooghly, and Barasat to the Basirhat region because they were the only major method of transit available to them. This Martin railway was built under British-Bengali joint ownership. This railway service was developed by Sir Rajendranath Mukhopadhyay, a Bengali entrepreneur, in joint venture with English businessman Thomas Aquinas Martin.¹⁷ This was an indication of the Bengali industrial initiative in the railway industry in Bengal. Markets, bazaars, schools, colleges, and public obstetric centres were built around the stations of this railway line. Agricultural produce and rural cottage industry products could easily be shipped to the city market through this train. Due to the Martin Railway, the communication system in those areas developed, for which later Ramsaday College at Amta and Howrah Narasingha College at Kadamtala were established. Many rural students had the opportunity to get admission there. The daily labouring people of the vast area of Howrah Hooghly and Barasat villages used to travel regularly to Howrah and Kolkata industrial areas by this Martin Rail. There is also a witty story about the slow pace of Martin Rail. A woman in the village was walking along the train line, and the driver very kindly offered her to get on the train. The woman replied, "You go, my son; I have to hurry."¹⁸

¹⁶ Mitra, R. (1951). *Jogajog Byabastha: Railpath. Kolkata Darpan*, Vol. 1. Kolkata: Subarnarekha, pp.214-18

¹⁷ Saha, A. *Ajo Smritipathe Ei Traine Asha Jaowa*, Anandabazar Patrika, 21st February, 2021

¹⁸Ibid.

Anil Kumar Dalui's *Choto Railer Checker Babu* is another famous novel in which the Martin Light Railways figured repeatedly. The story was, published in a series, by *Kishore Bharati Patrika* in the Shraavan Bhadra issue in 1386/1969. The theme of the novel was centred around the historical context of the 1940s. The entire novel was written on Martin Light Railway, or Martin Rail, and was mockingly called '*Mati kata Rail*' which means 'the train to dig mud'. The writer narrates that sometimes the engine would stumble and derail on the field. It had to rest for two to three hours before it started to run again. There are many rhymes and hearsay regarding the speed and timing of the train.

Similarly, Shibram Chakraborty's novel 'Howrah-Amta Railer Durghatana'¹⁹, poet Vishnu Dey's '*Bikshipta Jiban*'²⁰ and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's '*Abhijatrik*'²¹ satirically portrayed the slow speed of Martin Light Railway. Passengers composed *choda* on that:

“Martiner gaadi

Bholanath Kobrejer bari

Duggadas Singhir ghor

Ar Madhusudaner mala

Eder je biswas kore

*She shalar byata Shala.*²²

The Martin's rail .

The ayurvedic pill of Bholanath

The watch of Duggadas Singh

¹⁹ Chakraborty, S. (1347 B.S.). *Howrah-Amta Railer Durghatana*. Kolkata: Tara Press

²⁰ Dey, B. (1362 B.S.). *Bishnu Dey's Shreshtha Kabita*. Kolkata: Sri Sunil Kumar Roy, Navana

²¹ Bandopadhyay, B. (-). *Abhijatrik*. Kolkata: Mitra And Ghosh, retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.303603/page/n13/mode/2up> on 23.3.23

²² Dalui, A. K. (1991). *Choto Railer Checker Babu*. Kolkata: Ashabari publication, p.5

And the garland of Madhusudan

Who believe in them

He is a son of stupid.

(Translation Mine)

Here, *shala* means brother-in-law which was used as a slander, as the speed of the train was so slow that people could have walked faster than the train. Despite what people say regarding its speed, Martin Rail continued to be in use and in operation throughout the period. Hence, in spite of their slow speed, these trains became very popular with the people of all the areas around the line, and the people developed a lively, humorous relationship with the train drivers, conductors, and ticket checkers.

1.3 Tramways

Another important mode of transport was tramways within Calcutta and therefore, without a tram, Calcutta can not be imagined even today. Siddhartha Chattapadhyaya very nostalgically traces the historical ups and downs of Calcutta's traffic in his book '*Palki Thek Patal Rail*'. According to him, the need for tramways rose due to increasing population and territorial expansion of Calcutta. After the introduction of tramways from Sealdah to Armenian ghat on 24 February 1873 the tram was extensively used for passenger travel.²³

The author further describes the day the iconic tramways began their journey. The tram left from Sealdah where all the people had gathered together to see the tram. Three horse drawn tram cars were prepared to run that day - one first class and two second class cars. Every car had 45 seats. When the East Bengal Railway train reached Sealdah, the seats were fully occupied and some of the passengers even sat on the roof of the carriage and some hung from the tram like bats. This posed a problem as the first class tram carriage had few passengers, but the other two second class

²³ Chattopadhyaya, S. (1990). *Palki Theke Patal Rail*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, pp.55-73

carriages were unable to move due to their heavy weight. Somehow, after a long wait, the horse-drawn tram started moving, giving Calcutta a pace in life.

Unfortunately, after a few months, the 'Justice of Peace' stopped the tram carriages as it suffered heavy losses. The cost of running the tram was more than its income. Additionally, running the horse-driven tram was turning out to be expensive due to the cost of the horses. As a result, trams ceased operation on November 20, 1873.²⁴ A storm of criticism swept across Calcutta when the Justice of the Peace shut the trams down. In November 1878, the Company was sold to Dillwyn Parrish, Alfred Parrish, and Robinson Souttar of London. In 1878, a proposal was made by a group of businessmen to run the tram again in the city of Calcutta, the enthusiasm of which was shared by the others. The Parrish and Souttar Company was allowed to start trams in Calcutta. They changed the name of the Company to 'Tram Company of Calcutta'. The work of the new tram line was completed on November 13, 1880. The tram ran for the second phase on the Sealdah-Bowbazar line, from Sealda to Bowbazar. The tram ran along the Dalhousie Hair Street lines, and then the work of the new tram line began almost all over Calcutta. Within a year, the journey of the tram lines started in different places all over Calcutta in the second phase.²⁵

Chattopadhyaya also discusses that the evolution of tramways was not without its set of technical problems. Within a few years, he wrote that the horse-drawn trams continued to be troublesome. Calcutta Tramways Company looked for an alternate source of power to run the trams. Electricity was not sufficient at that time. After various discussions, it was decided that the tram would be henceforth operated by the steam engine. This method was not successful, and the tram ran on steam power only for about eleven months.²⁶ The search for alternative methods to pull the tram continued. The Kilburn Company, proposed to the government to run electric trams, the permission of which was given. On January 1, 1901, permission was given to the tram company to run electric trams in Calcutta for 30 years. The first electric tram in the city of Calcutta ran on March 27, 1902, on the Khidirpur line.²⁷

²⁴ Chattopadhyaya, S. (1990). *Palki Theke Patal Rail*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, pp.55-73

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. pp.55-73

²⁷ Ibid. pp.73-75

The trams not only gave momentum to the people of Calcutta, but also was integrated into the social and cultural life of the Bengalis. Many believed that Calcutta was an English city as can be discerned from a statement issued in the newspaper, *Englishman* on July 16, 1884. "Calcutta is a purely English city." Guha, however, disagreed with this statement and wrote that Calcutta was a city more of the locals than the English.²⁸ Despite this, it cannot be denied that Calcutta as a city did emerge as a colonial city.²⁹ The city needed people to serve them, and trams were an important source of transport for those people. It was the easiest and cheapest form of transport in Calcutta. For the rich and the poor alike, the tram was the only relatively mobile form of transport. Goods from distant regions of Bengal would reach Sealdah, where they were transported by tram to Calcutta sea ports, and from these ports, the goods were sent abroad for export. Again, the goods from the western parts of the Ganges via Howrah reached the eastern part of the Ganges, from where they were sent to the eastern part of Bengal. That is, inter or intra-trade, in both cases, the tram helped as an interim communication system. The tram also became an integral part of Bengali life. This illustration could be found in the poem of Rabindranath Tagore, which shows the intrinsic level of impact of trams on culture and the populace of Bengal:

Ek din rate ami swapno dekhinu-

“Cheye dekho”, “cheye dekho” bole jeno Binu.

Cheye dekhi thoka thuki borga-kodite,

Kolikata choliyache nodite nodite.

.....

Rasta choleche joto ajagar shap

²⁸ Guha Roy, S. (2007). *Calcutta Tramways: A Brief Outline, 1920-47*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, p. 21

²⁹ Sen, R. (2019). *Birth of a colonial city: Calcutta*. Taylor & Francis; Harris, R., & Lewis, R. (2012). Numbers didn't Count: the Streets of Colonial Bombay and Calcutta. *Urban History*, 39(4), pp.639-658; Chattopadhyay, S. (2000). Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of "White Town" in Colonial Calcutta. *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 59(2), pp.154-179

*Note: The poems have been included in the chapter on prose to convey the socio-cultural significance of tramways.

Pithe tar tram gari pore dhup dhap.

.....³⁰

One day I dreamt of at night-

Binu seems to say-”Look at”, “Look at”.

I saw the terraces of the buildings are knocking with each other,

Calcutta is moving slowly.

.....

The roads are going like pythons

The tram cars were running on them making shrilling sound.

.....

(Translation Mine)

Rabindranath depicts a picture of colonial Calcutta through the poem, where, along with other elements of Calcutta, Tram became a significant traditional component of city life. Tram is also mentioned in the poetry of famous Bengali poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954). He wrote:

Tramer liner path dhore hati:

Akhon gobhir rat

Kobekar kon she jibon jeno titkari diya jay

“Tumi jeno rong bhanga tram ek-

Depo nai, majurir proyojon nai

³⁰ Tagore, R. (2010). *Sahaj Path*, Vol. II. Kolkata: Vidyalay Shiksha Daptar Paschimanga Sarkar, pp.35-37

Kokhon emon hoye hay!

.....³¹

Strolling across the tram route

In the deep night,

My olden time goes by sneering

"You looks like a tram with distressed painting",

With no depot and no conductor.

Sometimes it happens like this, nonetheless.

.....

(Translation Mine)

The poem evokes a sense of introspection and reflection on the passage of time and life's journey. The imagery of the dilapidated coloured trams without a depot or conductor suggests a sense of abandonment or aimlessness. The tram emerged as the quintessential metaphor for life's myriad facets.

He again wrote:

Shesh tram muche geche, sesh shabdo, kolkata akhon

*Jiboner jagater ontim nishith*³²

³¹ Das, J. (1345 B.s./c.1938). 'Footpathe', *Mahaprithivi, Jibanananda Rachanabali*, Vol. 1. Edt. by Debiprasad Bandopadhyay. Dhaka: Gotidhara, p.613

³² Das, J. (1953). 'Ekti Nakshtra Ashe', *Jibanananda Rachanabali*, Vol. 1. Edt. by Debiprasad Bandopadhyay. Dhaka: Gotidhara, pp. 430-31

The last tram has wiped out and slo the last sound, Calcutta is now
 At the end of life, at the extreme edge of this universe, in the dawning night.

(Translation Mine)

Again he wrote:

.....

Koyekti adim sharpini sahodarar moto ei je tramer line chodiye ache

Payer tole, samasto shorirer rokto eder bishakto bishwad sparsho anubhab kore hatchi ami.

.....

Payer tole liklike tramer line, mather upore ashonkya jotil terer jal

*Shashon korche amake*³³

The tram lines are running like some primeval full sisters
 I'm feeling their corrosive flavours with my entire body, while stepping over them.

.....

The lanky tramlines run beneath my feet, and many intricate strings of wires over my head
 Are ruling me

.....

(Translation Mine)

³³ Das, J. (1944). 'Footpathe', *Mahaprithivi, Jibanananda Rachanabali*, Vol. 1. Edt. by Debiprasad Bandopadhyay. Dhaka: Gotidhara, pp.157-58

2. Reflections of Railways: Wonderment and Antagonism in Bengali prose

During the 19th century, the arrival of railways in colonial Bengal caused a great deal of surprise and amazement among the populace. The public was profoundly affected by the sheer size and speed of trains, their inventive use of steam power, and their capacity to convey big loads and passengers over great distances. Railways provided a considerably faster and more dependable means of transit than other conventional types of transportation, like bullock carts or boats. Apart from that, the people were startled and amazed by the physical transformation of the environment brought about by the building of railways. The creation of massive railway tracks, bridges, tunnels, and stations altered the natural environment. The sight of trains passing through scenic landscapes and previously inaccessible areas left people in awe.

The mammoth size of the train made the people compare it with other things and beings that they were in awe of. For instance, Pyarichand Mitra, a prominent Bengali writer, describes it as a wild elephant in his book, *Jat Kinchit* (1865).³⁴ He writes that people had all kinds of doubts even before the railway line was laid out. **Sketch of the First Passenger Train steamed out from Howrah.**

Mitra writes that when people heard of the long *Louha Paat* (iron rails), they said, “*We can't find an iron nail; where will such a big iron rail come from?*”³⁵ On the first day when the train started, not everyone got a ticket. The news reporters from the train saw that the local people on both sides of the line were standing in awe at the fire chariot. Some were saluting, and some were greeting with joined hands; some were raising their hands and expressing their surprise.³⁶ Mitra also writes that railways were believed to be Goddess Sankari, who would descend from Kailash with a war cry. This made people perform puja. It appeared to the author that people paid their obeisance to the train as ‘she’ might be tired after a long journey. The famous song ‘*Rail, rail, rail tomar paye dei tel’ ...!* (Rail, I give you oil on your feet) demonstrates the situation when people worship the

³⁴ Mitra, Pyarichand, (2006). ‘Jat Kinchit’, *Pyarichand Mitra Rachanabali*. Edt. by Alok Roy. Kolkata:Sopan, p. 247

³⁵ *Bengal Harkaru*, 30th August 1854

³⁶ Mitra. R. (1980). Jogajog Byabastha: Railpath, *Kolikata Darpan*, Vol. 1. Santinikatan: Subarnarekha Pub., pp.197-246

train. During the time of drought, as portrayed in ‘*Pratham Prahar*’ railways provided job opportunities to the people of Bengal, for which women were grateful and worshipped the train.³⁷

Bholanauth Chunder in his travelogue, *The Travel of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal And Upper India* writes: “Travelling by the Rail very much resembles migrating in one vast colony, or setting out together in a whole moving town or caravan.”³⁸ He compared the invention with *Pegasus* of the Greeks and *Pukaraj* of the Hindoos. Burke once reproached that “if the English were to quit India, they would leave behind them no memorial of art or science worthy of a great and enlightened nation.” Chunder said that the introduction of this great novelty has silenced Burke’s reproach as well.³⁹ Anil Chandra Datta also expressed his wonder in his article ‘*Railpath*’, and said that “*people with short life span are establishing beautiful cities in dense forest, expanding railways through invulnerable mountains,ruling the world which is full of animals without fail. Isn’t their mind, who are inventing these, even more amazing? Isn’t the amazing brain of the discoverer of all the strange scientific discoveries that have shocked the world more amazingly?*”⁴⁰

Durgacharan Roy in his literary work ‘*Devaganer Martye Agaman*’ brings a divine element to the establishment of railways. He says that even the Gods were drawn to witness the development of the railway vehicle on Earth. ‘*Devaganer Martye Agaman*’, a witty fiction, was earlier published in a series in Dwarkanath Vidyabhushan's *Kalpadrum* magazine in 1891, which later was published in the form of a book. Durgacharan Roy writes a fictional account of the response of Gods to British rule. In one of the sections in the book, Lord Indra and Lord Varun are shown to be having a discussion on Great Britain. Lord Varun says that he has never witnessed a wiser and a more magnificent king than the English king. The Gods feared that the kingdom of heaven also would soon pass into the hands of the English king. Their latest discoveries especially frightened the Gods of losing their thrones.⁴¹ In order to understand their enemy the Gods were curious about

³⁷ Chowdhury, R. (1988). ‘Pratham Prahar’, *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, pp. 44-45

³⁸ Chunder, B. (1869). *The Travel of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal And Upper India*, Vol-1. London: N. Trubner & Co., p.140

³⁹ Ibid. p.141

⁴⁰ Datta, C. A. (1899). *Railpath*, *Prayash*, Vol. 1. January, p.4

⁴¹ Roy, D. C. (1899). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s Pub. p.1

this new transportations (train) especially at Calcutta. The author further writes that the Gods expressed their wish to see the train. In the conversation, *“it is my absolute wish to see Kolikata and to get the train once, Lord Narayana proves his immense curiosity about the newly introduced communication system. Narayana asked, what is a machine car? In his reply to that question, Varun replied that this is one kind of chariot made by the British. This chariot is run by a machine, so it is called a "machine car”*.⁴²

‘Pather Panchali’, another important novel which reflects the amazement and wonderment of Bengalis at the sight of railways. The amazement gets reflected through the eyes of children. It was very rare that children were used in a novel to showcase the changes in the society. Apu and Durga (the main character in the novel) live’s revolved around a desire to see the train. The character of Durga, a brave and carefree girl and his brother Apu were very close. Their bond becomes strong over their desire to see the train. Unfortunately Durga died before her desire could be fulfilled. However, Apu brings her wish to completion when he gets to go to a railway station and boards the train. Few excerpts from the book are reproduced here to understand the deep influence of railway on common people’s life. “Durga looked at the blurred field far away across the paved road and suddenly got up and said, “Let's do one thing, Apu? Let's go to see the railways.” The railway line was far from their home but the gaze was fixed on the distance, imagining it nearer than it was. They could not really travel the distance at the time because they were afraid of their mother. Durga eventually gives in to her desire, gets up and says, “Apu, let's go and see. I will tell lies to my mother.” So the two siblings rushed to discover a new world. For the first time in their lives, unhindered, unrestrained, their fresh young blood was excited by the joy of liberation. Where was the time to think about what would happen next? Even on that chilly winter day, they were perspiring. They could not see the train. After some time, they lost their way. At last, after returning home, there were so many lies Durga had to tell their mother. And all that suffering was to see that new, huge, fast steam machine.⁴³ Apu got a second chance to see the railway line by leaving home with his father. Baba said- “Look at the railway track, Apu”. After hearing his father he ran fast, crossed the gate, and came onto the road. Then he looked in wonder

⁴² Roy, D. C. (1899). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, p.12

⁴³ Bandopadhyay, B. (1972). *Pather Panchali*. Kolkata: Mitra And Ghosh Publishers, p. 83

on both sides of the railway tracks. He had several questions about it: Why are the two iron lines laid parallelly? Why do the trains go over them? Why do they go over the iron instead of on the ground? Why don't they slide? Are they called wires? What's the 'sho sho' sound running inside the wire? Unfortunately the train was late, so he could not see the train. After returning he did a lot of research and made a railway line by making a wire from the stems of *Tinospora (Gulantha lata)* on the poles, like the two edges of the railway line. Unfortunately, his mother, a simple woman, could not understand her son's passion for railways. She tore the telegram wires despite vehement protests from her son. This hurt and angered him but he could not do much about it.⁴⁴ Apu was fortunate enough to at least see a railway line, but Durga only saw pictures from one of Apu's books. A very long train, many wheels, a machine in front, set on fire, and smoke is flying out of it. She knew that the train and the rail line were made entirely of iron, as were the wheels. And when the railway train runs, smoke comes out, so if there are any thatched houses around it, they get burned. Brother and sister both dreamed of riding the train together after Durga's marriage.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, a severe fever took her life before that. Apu could never forget Durga's wish: "Apu, will you show me the train if I get well?" Eventually, Apu got the chance to travel by train to Kasi in reality. He was to travel from his ancestral home, Nishchindapur for Kashi by train. After leaving home, the only thought in his mind was when he would reach the train station and see the train. When he reached the station, there was no limit to his surprise. The long pole, wire, red lights, station control rooms, various activities of the station master, platform, and everything surrounding it surprised him, "What a huge train! What a terrible sound! Is it called an engine, which is in front? Uh! What a case?" After getting into the train, Apu had thought that the person who can not ride the train nowadays, how will they survive? The happiness felt after boarding the train knew no bounds. The excitement of brand-new discoveries was all about him as he looked out the train window. The joy of travelling by train made him forget all the sorrows of leaving his birthplace, leaving behind the memoirs of his sister and his old playmates.⁴⁶ Apu's fascination for trains and desire to ride them represent all Bengali boys' excitement with the newly built railways.

⁴⁴Bandopadhyay, B. (1972). *Pather Panchali*. Kolkata: Mitra And Ghosh Publishers, pp. 82-93

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.115

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.174

Apart from this novel, newspapers of the time were full of accounts of people who were very eager to get a glimpse of a train like Apu of *Pather Panchali*. People from the countryside came to the railway line to see the train. As soon as they saw the approaching train, they would all shout simultaneously.⁴⁷ However, not all prose and narratives record and depict awe and wonder. The following section showcases antagonistic attitudes that had developed in people towards railways as depicted in Bengali prose and narratives.

Kalidas Maitra, Radharaman Mitra, and Ramapada Chowdhury depict the initial resistance towards railways among the populace. While constructing the rail line from Manchester to Liverpool, many objections have been raised against the railways. Some people called it the ‘tool of evil.’ Few people objected that if railways were to be built in the city, the fumes of the train would cause the fur of the ships, etc., to discolour and interfere with the manufacture of cloth, so efforts should be made to prevent these smoke-emitting machines from entering the city. Others objected that during the night, rain and snowfall, the speed of the train could be reduced, so the railway was unnecessary. In addition, some objected, as the fumes emitted from coal would harm people’s health. Wordsworth addresses this in a letter to Gladstone, the British leader of the time: “The project, if carried out, will destroy the staple of the country, which is its beauty. It will prove subversive to its quiet and be highly injurious to its morals.” Ruskin Bond also wrote: “I detest railways, Your railway has cut through and spoiled some of the loveliest bits of scenery in the country...now every fool in Busto can be in Bakewell which you think a lucrative process of exchange- you fools everywhere” Charles Dickens also despised rail through the character of his novel, ‘Martin Chuzzlewit’.⁴⁸ Amidst such vehement opposition the English railway authorities continued to publish many articles and pamphlets to attract people.⁴⁹

The introduction of railways in India, the opposition in general was not on technical grounds but seeing railways more as a supernatural phenomenon beyond their understanding. Bengal also had a similar experience except for a few nonviolent protests. According to Kalidas Maitra at the very beginning, the protest came from French colonial power. They objected to the construction of rail

⁴⁷ Datta, A. (2008). *Akshaykumar Datta Rachana Samagra*, Vol. I. Kolkata: Pashchimbanga Bangla Academy, p.50

⁴⁸ Chowdhuri, P. (2012). *Somaj Chitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil Publication, pp. 89-90

⁴⁹ Maitra, K. (1856). *Bashpiya Sakat O Bharatvarshiya Railway*. Serampore: J. H. Peters, p.36

lines through the French colony of Chandannagar in Bengal; it was seen as encroaching upon their territory. The boundaries between French and British territories had not been clearly defined. Later, settlement was reached between the British and French to carry forward the project.⁵⁰

Another important obstruction in the railway construction was the fear of losing caste by working with the British people. In this context, it is worth mentioning what Ramapada Chowdhury wrote about the genesis of the term 'coolie', which essentially meant working men of the railways. He writes that the people on whom the British built their most powerful tool, the railways, to rule the country were coolies, or labourers. Chowdhury makes a study on the construction of Bengal Nagpur Railway. At both ends Nagpur and Bengal he observed that it was difficult to find people to work on the railway line because of caste restrictions. The caste, *Koli* (an untouchable caste) who lived in the Bombay province were ready to work. But other caste Hindus were afraid of losing ritual purity by working for the British, on the railway construction. - cast *Kolis*. According to Chowdhury, their labour was the pioneering force behind the foundation of 'machine civilization'. He drew similarities in the case of Bengal, but the need for employment overpowered the desire to maintain caste restrictions. Initially, labourers were brought from Bihar, Chota Nagpur and tribal regions of Bengal. Chowdhury observed how the railway companies manipulated people to work for them. For instance, during the construction of the Bengal Nagpur railway line, there was a dearth of construction workers. The railway company capitalised on the drought situation. It lured the people to perform labour by a promise of food. Officers of railway companies lured the poor people of Bengal by saying: "if you want a job, you will get a job; we will bring you rice from other countries; you will not be thinking of food."⁵¹ So people came in large groups to work with the railway company. Tarasankar also observes similar labour problems in the construction of East Bengal Railway lines which centred around preservation of the caste system.⁵²

⁵⁰ Mitra. R. (1980). Jogajog Byabastha: Railpath, *Kolikata Darpan*, Vol. 1. Santinikatan: Subarnarekha Pub, p.199

⁵¹ Chowdhury, R. (1988). 'Pratham Prahar', *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p.40

⁵² Bandopadhyay, T. (1951). 'Hansuli Banker Upakatha', *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol. vii. Kolikata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, pp. 321-22

Ramapada Chowdhury mentions the problem of ‘acceptability’ that was encountered on the Bengal Nagpur Railway in his book *Pratham Prahar*. During the opening time of the line from Howrah to Kolaghat, people came to watch the new mechanised transport, but when it started to run with a loud whistle, people were reluctant to use the train to travel. Chowdhury observed in his narrative that the agents and officials had to work hard to convince the locals of the advantages of railways. But the populace was still not convinced enough to take a train journey. One of the greatest fears was that riding the train meant losing their caste, as people from different walks of life travel together, within the same space and in close association. They were afraid of violating ritual purity. The Company had to lure people by saying that, ‘you can go wherever you want by train and come back for free. And if you ride the rail, everyone will be given a black blanket.’ The Company even distributed one lakh and fifty thousand blankets in the next three months. Soon people realised the comforts of railways and overcame the caste barrier.⁵³

Chowdhury observes another mental barrier that people initially had for using railways as a method of communication which could have affected their caste. They thought that “the train was a ‘machine python’ that had a long body like a snake, walked on its chest like a snake, exhaled smoke through its nose, and whistled like a snake. When such a thing is moving on the ground, the curse is sure to descend on the village, and if they get into the train, the caste will be lost. There will be no difference between Brahmins and Bagdis, lower caste people.” In order to rectify this, Chowdhury writes that in a village called Malanch, a traditional *yagna* was performed to remove this ‘evil’. Things did not help the cause of the railway company officials when many people died of cholera. The Brahmins took this opportunity to blame the railways. This resulted in the young men of the village unsuccessfully attempting to uproot the railway track overnight. Eventually, a police guard was posted to avoid such disruptions.⁵⁴

Except for a few superstitious fears and nonviolent opposition, the outset of railways was unhampered in India. Rather, in Bengal, Dwarkanath Tagore, Mutilal Sil, Ram Gopal Ghosh, and other renowned personalities had a keen interest in the introduction of railways. In various journals

⁵³Bandopadhyay, T. (1951). ‘Hansuli Banker Upakatha’, *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol. vii. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers., pp.40-41

⁵⁴ Chowdhury, R. (1988). ‘Pratham Prahar’, *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, pp. 37-46

and literature, railways have been cited as symbols of western scientific progress.⁵⁵ Railways, rather, became essential in day-to-day life and symbolised progress, which could be demonstrated by the statement of Rabindranath Tagore in his narration, ‘*Chotanagpur*’. On his way from Howrah to Chotanagpur he had to get down at Giridih station because the train destination was up to Giridih. He had to travel the rest of the way without a railway train. On reaching Giridih station, he said- “There is no more railway. From now on, I have to go by postal car. It is driven by Men. Is it called a car?” The last statement (is it called a car?) demonstrates his fondness for trains and his annoyance towards that particular traditional transport system.⁵⁶

3. Railways and Passengers’ Woes

In the initial stages, railway operations were fraught with peril. Passengers faced hazards while travelling. This type of news has been reported in many newspapers. In many narratives and literary works, a similar picture has also been reflected. Howrah station was the most vivid example of this type of chaos, where passengers had to face trouble. Along with the crowding around the ticket counter, another problem was the harassment by rail police and constables. In *Model Bhagini* written by Jogendra Chandra Basu, it has been portrayed very articulately. In the story, the narrator is the victim while taking the ticket,--*The lights are on at Howrah Station. People are chatting, and the station is grinning like a joyous Mallika. The rule of England, the king of merchants, is, nevertheless, more surprising than this. I pleaded to the shopkeeper to accept the money while holding it in my hand and said, "Here, sir, take my money; take it." In addition, the crowd and the snugness of the constable's control are crushing my bones. Still, I have no intention of returning. I still keep saying, Take money, give tickets, please. What is more amazing than this? The third class ticket booth is more crowded.*⁵⁷ In the beginning, due to lack of skilled manpower and planning, there was chaos on the platform, at the ticket counter, during boarding the train, and within the compartment.

Jogendrachandra Basu’s ‘*Model Bhagini*’ shows that suffering, turmoil, and torture were the fate of second class/intermediate and third class passengers. He illustrated that the bench was not big

⁵⁵ Prayash, (1899). 1st year, Vol. I. p. 390

⁵⁶ Tagore, R. (1935). *Chotanagpur*, Bichitra Prabandha. Kolkata: Visva Bharati Granthan Bibhag, pp. 22-23

⁵⁷ Basu, J. (1893). *Model Bhagini*. Kolkata: Sri Keval Ram Chattopadhyay, p.100

enough to sit on, and it would have been in an unstable condition due to bug bites. Moreover, when the train stopped at any station, many third and fourth class passengers boarded in intermediate class. This led to many arguments making the journey an unpleasant one. In addition, if there were extra people for the third class on any station, the station master ordered them to board the second class compartment. Sometimes a few middle class passengers raised an objection by saying: “Why did you allow me to ride in second class? How could we survive in the crowd with so many people?” In reply to that, the station master informed them in a serious voice, “that there was a rule of seating five people on one bench. There were not more than ten passengers in this compartment. Those who want to go alone should reserve a compartment.”⁵⁸ The pathetic conditions of the third class passengers of that time have also been depicted in ‘*Devaganer Martye Aagaman*’ where Gods have been shown at the pathetic condition of the third class passengers. They blamed the officials of railway stations for that mismanagement.

Another problem that has been the subject of many narratives is the great demand for tickets and its short supply. The issue had become so acute that it created problems for the passengers. Sukumar Sen in his book ‘*Railer Paa Chali*’ describes in a picturesque narrative the mind boggling scenes in the railway trains and premises. He writes that the rise in population, the growth of cities, and city oriented activities led to a growing demand for trains. Alongside, there was an increase in various types of anti-social activities. Sen further states that the level of theft and robbery increased.⁵⁹ According to him the railways stations and compartments developed into chaotic zones where everything seems to have been lost, including cash, luggage, bedding, and even family members. Theft, robbery, murder, and smuggling in trains emerged around railways. Sometimes, births and deaths also took place within the compartment of the train.⁶⁰

4. Mapping the Socio-Economic Change due to Introduction of Railways in the Literary Traditions of Bengal

Bengali narratives vividly capture the marvels and challenges of the railway system, delving into its profound impact on society and culture. Since the inception of railways in Bengal, it provided

⁵⁸ Basu, J. (1893). *Model Bhagini*. Kolkata: Sri Keval Ram Chattopadhyay, p.102

⁵⁹ Sen, S. (1990). *Railer Paa Chali*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p.38

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 39

many job opportunities, transforming the professional and social landscapes for many Bengalis. However, discrimination in employment, wages, and facilities fueled tensions among railway workers, sparking waves of agitation. Railways not only changed the social life of their workers, it impacted the Bengali society as a whole.

4.1 The Advent of Railways and Scope of Employment:

The construction of railways required a significant labour force, and numerous workers were employed in building railway lines, bridges, tunnels, and stations. This provided employment opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers, including engineers, surveyors, masons, carpenters, and labourers. Once the railways were established, a large number of people were employed to operate and maintain the railway infrastructure. This included locomotive drivers, station masters, ticket collectors, guards, signalmen, and maintenance staff. These positions created a range of employment opportunities in various railway departments. The development of railways stimulated the growth of ancillary industries in colonial Bengal. These industries provided goods and services to support the railway system. For example, there was a demand for coal to fuel locomotives, resulting in the growth of coal mining operations and employment in associated sectors. Additionally, industries such as iron and steel, construction materials, and manufacturing benefited from increased demand due to railway construction. The railways acted as a catalyst for increased trade and transportation in Bengal. They facilitated the movement of goods, agricultural produce, and raw materials across different regions, enabling economic integration and market access. This expansion in trade created employment opportunities in sectors such as warehousing, logistics, and commercial activities. The establishment of railway lines led to the development of towns and cities along the rail routes. These urban centres became hubs for trade, commerce, and administration, generating employment in various sectors like banking, retail, hospitality, and services. The railways introduced new technologies and methods of transportation, requiring the training of local workers in various railway-related skills. This led to the establishment of technical institutes, workshops, and training centres, providing opportunities for skill development and vocational training.

The novel '*Devaganer Martye Agaman*' illustrates the socio-economic impact in a humorous fashion. For instance, God *Shani* and his son *Upananda* went in search of employment, in Jamalpur

Workshop. When Brahma asked Upashani, “Why are you here?” He replied that his father had informed him that, as Bengalis have left their trade and gone ‘crazy’ for jobs, they should also go to bring good luck to the “job market”. Father opined that since he was an old man, he can't get any job but his son should just look for a job in the railways as they were highly lucrative. Durgacharan Roy further substantiates, “There are many railway clerks in Jamalpur. They were very happy there as they get two increments annually and a free pass for rail travel.”⁶¹ It is abundantly obvious from Upashani's comments that the prospects for employment and trends among Bengali people for obtaining a career in the railways were excessively remunerative. Upashani's dialogue reveals the tendency of the Bengali populace toward their official and clerical jobs. The Bengali Babu class was created as a result of these career options.

Similarly, many different kinds of Babus (gentlemen) were mentioned in the book ‘*Railway Charit*’, which was authored by an anonymous writer who might have worked for the railway. The book is divided into numerous chapters based on the personalities of the Babu class. These include *tar babus*, who exchange telegrams; *ticket babus*, who examine tickets; *luggage babus*, who were in charge of luggage; *varanda babus*, who inspect platforms; *jamadar babus*, who clean stations; *maal babus*, who were in charge of goods; *station master babus*; *big babus*; *majo babus*; *account babus*, and so many other classes of *babus*. The narrator narrates the character of *Telegram Babu* excellently, but he also portraits other *railway Babus* in diverse ways. Each babu had their own distinct mannerisms, dress, and speech. Their accommodations, pay, and additional income have all been described in extremely amusing detail.⁶² From the descriptions here, it becomes clear that the introduction of railways caused the emergence of the *babu* class in Bengali society.

4.2 Tales of Toil: Narratives of Discrimination Amongst the Railway Workers

As has been stated above, while the railways created employment opportunities. It is important to note that the benefits accruing from railways were not evenly distributed. The British often held higher-ranking positions and benefited more from higher wages. On the other hand, Indian workers and labourers suffered low wages, poor working conditions, and limited opportunities for

⁶¹ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, p.114

⁶² Ghosh, S. (1991). *Bashpiya Rath O Railway Charit*. Kolkata: Ananda Publisher, p.86

advancement, reflecting broader colonial power dynamics and inequalities. Railway working-class movements have been discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The novels '*Devaganer Martye Agaman*' by Durga Charan Roy and '*Pratham Prahar*' by Pramatha Chowdhury, portray the discrimination in job opportunities, differential housing facilities, and unequal wages created tensions among the Indian workers. They describe how the Anglo Indians and British railway employees lived in a comfortable environment of railway colonies. They had a beautiful house, garden, a wide, clean road with beautiful trees, and their family lives were full of joy. They had facilities like electricity and radio. They had separate schools, medical hospitals, and recreation centres. But Indian employees had no such accommodations.⁶³ On the other hand, Siddharth Ghosh's *Bashpiya Rath O Railway Charit*" claims that amenities and accommodations for Indian staff were minimal. Bengali babu's homes were long, one-story structures that resembled pigeon holes. Under one single roof, there were many rooms randomly divided by walls, where Bengali railway workers lived irrespective of the positions that they held.⁶⁴ The way both the narrators depict the different types of accommodation for Europeans and Indians represent the discrimination in the system.

Ramapada Chowdhury in his story, '*Pratham Prahar*' mentioned the emergence of a new working class category-*Teenpatiya*, which consisted of converted Christians in Bengal. If anyone converted to Christianity, they were given better job opportunities and were observed to be dressed in western attires and speak in English. Bengali people disliked them, calling them *Teenpatiya*, which indicates contempt for them.⁶⁵ Railways, as an industry, provided ample opportunities for the emergence of new classes but it also created divisions of race and religion thus compounding societal division already aggrieved by castes.

According to Chowdhury, the lower class people who worked as porters and labourers were most neglected. They were mainly from remote areas and stayed in very narrow, congested, and non-airy areas without proper sanitation and clean water.⁶⁶ They were paid less, and were mentally harassed which made them frustrated and furious; This resulted in them participating in various strikes to demand for their rights. The story of Bidhu Babu, who was a ticket checker, in Martin

⁶³ Chowdhury, R. (1988). '*Pratham Prahar*', *Upanyas Samgra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p.41

⁶⁴ Ghosh, S. (1991). *Bashpiya Rath O Railway Charit*. Kolkata: Ananda Publisher, p.87

⁶⁵ Chowdhury, R. (1988). '*Pratham Prahar*', *Upanyas Samgra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p.39

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.47

Rail is very relevant in this context. Anil Kumar Dalui, in his story '*Choto Railer Checker Babu*', narrates his pathetic situation. Despite his hard and tireless work, Vidhu was unable to support the family with his minimum salary. As a result, scarcity became a daily companion that pushed him into dishonest ways and forced him to occasionally take bribes from the passengers who travelled without tickets.⁶⁷

Various portrayals of oppression of the working class could be found in many narratives. For instance, Ramapada Chowdhury in his novel '*Pratham Prahar*' narrates that railway workers were always anxious. There were four people at the gate who recorded the entry time of all workers and reported it to the head officer. The head officer then confronted the late entrants. Further on, with every error of their resulted in deduction of one or two days' salary Day after day, this type of torture and harrassment broke the morale and spirit of the workers. Within a few years dissatisfaction arose among the employees and workers, and strikes broke out in many railway offices. Gradually, labour organisations started to form to show their agitations and rights. In *Pratham Prahar*, Ramapada Chwodhury refers to the growth of labour organisations in the Bengal-Nagpur section.⁶⁸

4.3 Train Schedules and Transformation in Way of Life:

Tarasankar Bandopadhyay's '*Hansuli Banker Upakatha*' narrated how the train schedules transformed the daily lives of people in colonial Bengal. They revolutionised transportation, making it quicker, more practical, and more widely available. Railways influenced the way people lived, worked, and interacted. They changed the fabric of daily life by affecting prevalent patterns of communication, social interactions, leisure pursuits, and daily routines. Those who were woken up by the chirping sound of birds and the call of hens, and ended their weary day by the murmuring of birds at dusk, were now forced to change their concept of time by the jolting sound intrusions of the whistling trains. The railway changed the course of their lives. The echo of this changing concept has been found in the novel '*Hansuli Banker Upakatha*', written by Tarasankar Bandopadhyay: "*The railway line has passed through the east direction of the village named*

⁶⁷ Dalui, A. K. (1991). *Choto Railer Checker Babu*. Kolkata: Ashabari publication, p.53

⁶⁸ Chowdhury, R. (1988). '*Pratham Prahar*', *Upanyas Samgra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p.37

Hansuli. Passing the Chandanpur station, the rail line crosses the bridge over the Kopai river. The bridge is clearly visible from the embankment named Neel which is located at the turn of Hansuli. The 'watch' of the life of the Kahar area of Hansuli goes by, according to the trains that come out on that bridge. At seven o'clock, the men of Kaharpara go out for their daily work after watching the signal of the train. Once the train leaves at seven o'clock, the women of the Kahar go out to work, sell cow dung fuel, and milk. With the sound of the up and down train, all household work would have been completed, and they would even have fixed the days with the time of the train. The train does not go on Sunday evening; it goes early in the morning. That means the day there was no train during the daytime was Sunday for them."⁶⁹ (Translation Mine). This indicates that the train schedules changed the lifestyle of people in general whether common or elites. The train had a scheduled time, so they had to catch the train on time. A ticket counter would also open at a certain time to take the ticket. Henceforth, railways gave people the speed and habit of keeping pace with the clock.

Devaganer Mortye Agaman portrays the changing lifestyle of a group of Bengali people. Just as the railway created employment opportunities, it also changed the lifestyle of Bengali workers. '*Shabda hoile pore dhore rakha day/Desi, Bilatir pal jhanke jhanke jay*'(if there is whistle (in workshops), it is very tough to hold them/ herd of natives and foreigners march for the work) - the proverb mentioned by God Varun in '*Devaganer Martye Agaman*—means the working lifestyle of the Bengali clerical community, was very different from that of pre-railway times. The whistle of the workshop alerted the working class to join their place of work. The clerical class also reported for their work according to given schedules. The dietary habits of the Bengali people, especially those who worked in the railways underwent a change, especially their morning schedules. Earlier the routine would include offerings to their Gods, now was shortened to a hurried breakfast and chewing of betel leaf.⁷⁰

Deavaganer Martye Agaman, further highlights the changing living style of a clerk/babu, through describing the acerbity-flurried incident of a *Babu* household. *Babu* would wake up at three o'clock

⁶⁹ Bandopadhyay, T. (1951). 'Hansuli Banker Upakatha', *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol. vii. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, pp.194-5

⁷⁰ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, p.115

in the morning with his family yelling '*chapao-chapao*' (quickly! start cooking!). He would bathe hurriedly with two buckets of well water and would order his wife to give him food, saying, 'Bring rice; bring rice quickly, it's too late'. The hassled wife would usually give him bowls of hot rice, vegetable curry and hot *dal*. Unfortunately the Babu was forced to eat piping hot food due to lack of time for fear of being late. Naturally, this would burn his tongue, while making fifty-six different facial expressions while swallowing his food without relishing it. Many times the *babu* would rush to the workshop without finishing his breakfast.⁷¹ This is the statement mentioned by God Varun about the pitiful condition of the workers and clerks of the railway workshops, which also depicts the changing lifestyle of the working class community of Bengal.

Devaganer Martye Agaman also evidenced that railways provided opportunities for social mobility, challenging traditional social hierarchies in colonial Bengal. The increased accessibility and mobility offered by railways enabled individuals to seek education, employment, and economic advancement beyond their immediate communities. The railways played a role in the emergence of a new middle class, breaking down rigid social divisions and facilitating upward social mobility. In the workshop, the working class marched towards the workshop in such a way that that picture was absent in previous Bengali society, which even astounded the Gods. As if the Bengalis had at that time one target, which was to get a job in the railways and its workshops. The author here writes of the breaking down of traditional social-hierarchical systems due to the adoption of western structure and systems. He complains of Brahmans abandoned the Vedas or Vaidas (doctors) renounced the medical profession, potters and goldsmiths relinquished pots and jewellery; barbers deserted their profession of shaving and hairdressing; and washermen casted away their ancestral trade.⁷² In Bengal, independent businesses disappeared as many abandoned their own trades and became dependent on others. Although the Bengalis improved in the field of pre-education, they did not understand what benefited themselves and the country.⁷³

The changes were not only in terms of employment, but also in all spheres of life and social behaviour centred around the railways. Durgacharan Roy's '*Devaganer Mortye Agaman*' and

⁷¹ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata:Dey's Publishing, p. 115

⁷² Ibid. p.117

⁷³ Ibid.

Tarasankar Bandopadhyay's '*Hansuli Banker Upakatha*' write of these changes. The establishment centred around the railway stations and workshops showcased remarkable changes in the socio-economic scenario of Bengal. Railway companies and workshops demanded thousands of labourers. Not all of those workers were local, so employees from far and wide came to work in Bengal. Since the work arrangement was temporary they did not see any point in buying a property. They lived in quarters or rented houses near their place of employment. Thus the authors point out that the practice of living in quarters was started after the introduction of railways in Bengal. The railway quarters were assigned according to the status and posts of the workers and determined their lifestyle.⁷⁴

Deavaganer Martye Agaman shows that introduction of railways not only impacted socio-economic landscape but also cultural behaviour of railway workers. Bengali clerks changed their behaviour in order to get in touch with the Anglo-Indians even if they did not live with them. A change in clothing and dressing could be observed. They learned to abandon Nagara shoes for boots, original Indian *dhoti* for British dresses, and *swal jamias* instead of *bala posh* (the Indian rags).⁷⁵ The young boy, Korali, in '*Hansuli banker Upakatha*' by Tarasankar Bandopadhyay is the most relevant example of these changes. The context of '*Hansuli Banker Upakatha*' is set in the conflict between the traditional Indian social system and the modernity brought about by the railway line. Here, the railway line has been represented as the epitome of modernity and progress. In the novels, the psychological conflict between Banwari, the head of Kaharpara, and modern, fearless, rationalist Korali. Banwari Kahar, had forbidden the people from Kaharpara to work on the railway line as it would threaten their caste and religious purity when working with the railway employees. But Korali ignored the ban and started earning his living as a railway porter. As a result of that he was mocked by other men which did not bother Korali. Soon his ways began to change positively which was also observed by other men. He became smarter and was now well versed with company rules and regulations and learnt mannerisms of the officials of the Company which included showing chivalry towards women. Korali also challenges the superstitious practices of

⁷⁴Bandopadhyay, T. (1851). '*Hansuli Banker Upakatha*', *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol. vii. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, pp. 208 & 244

⁷⁵ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, p.117

the people of his community. For instance, he does not hesitate to kill a snake whose killing is forbidden in the village. He knew the rational reason behind it from one of the railway officers.⁷⁶

The changes brought about by the railways to the Bengali populace's lifestyle helped to grow the Babu culture. It can be safely presumed that the railway clerk was no less responsible for the rise of the Babu class in Bengali society. A statement given in *Devaganer Martye Agaman* apt the picture of solvency of those classes. It says: “no one is going to see whether one eats or not at home, but everyone sees the dress” proves the changing lifestyle of the working class. Railway Clerks who were paid Rs. 15 per month also could afford a necklace to their spouses every year.⁷⁷ Both narratives, *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* and *Devaganer Mortye Agaman* depict the changes of previous psychological mindset and the rise of new classes dependent on the economic facilities brought about by railways.

This new employment in railways led the people to migrate from villages to towns. Educated young people were leaving their ancestral homes and joint families for their jobs in newly emerging railway establishments. Durga Charan Roy in his work *Devaganer Martye Agaman* narrated that the railway clerical class was happy to receive their monthly salaries regularly in cash. From the narrative of ‘*Devaganer Martye Agaman*’, it is very clear that the upper clerical section of the employees were living happily with their families. Simultaneously thousands of labourers were converging around workshops and railway projects with their families. However, this class of workers and lower level clerks were being oppressed and were insufficiently paid, which has been discussed in Chapter 3.

The migration from rural to the urban led to the deteriorating state of the agrarian economy of Bengal. The poverty faced by the peasants led them to look for alternative jobs or they ended up becoming daily wagers. Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath allude to the causes behind the plight of those poor cultivators in their narrations. Bankim Chandra, in his essay, ‘*Bangadesher Krishak*’ (The Farmers of Bengal), raised the question

⁷⁶ Bandopadhyay, T. (1952). ‘Hansuli Banker Upakatha’, *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol. vii. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, pp. 201-259

⁷⁷ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, p.117

*“Can't you see the prosperity? Look at that! The iron train, on the iron line, is crossing a month's journey in one day with loud noise and power. ...However, I have one thing to ask in this abundance of goodness - whose happiness is this? Hasim Sheikh and Rama Kaivarta are ploughing for six hours under the burning sun with bare heads and bare feet with two sick oxen and one borrowed plough. Their heads are bursting in the sun of this warm month, and their chests are bursting with thirst. Then, after coming back home, they will lie on the ground on a torn mat. The next day, they will do the same thing. You tell me that Hasim Sheikh and Rama Kaivarta are benefiting from you?”*⁷⁸ (Translation Mine)

Rabindranath Tagore in his essay, ‘*Bilasher Fansh*’ (Noose of the Luxury) gives another reason for the migration of young people who worked on the farms to the city in search of jobs. In the essay he described his visit to a farmer's house in Birbhum district. Upon his visit the patriarch of a family requested him to give his son a job in the city. Rabindranath was puzzled and enquired, why did he want to send his son away from the farms which his ancestors had tilled for many generations? The response of the farmer through Tagore opens up a discussion on the mindset of the rural youngmen of the time. Firstly, the farmer says that due to the pressure on land because of revenue demands it was difficult to survive with only the income coming from the land. Secondly, the younger generation also was enamoured by western lifestyle which had its own set of demands which made them change their lifestyle. Tagore gives justification by providing few examples such as the young men earlier had spent the winter days wearing *dolai* (a piece of cloth), but later they frowned if they didn't get a foreign over coat/jacket/shawl. When people visited each other's homes it was expected that they would be served better with sweets instead of jaggery and flattened rice. Another example that Tagore gives is that when the young men visited their in-laws' house, they feel ashamed to go without boots. So the farmers can not afford to provide for their children western lifestyle by earning through farming alone.⁷⁹

Railways had-reached the interior area of Bengal, and with that, foreign goods became available in these hinterlands. But the income of the farmers was not sufficient to purchase these goods.

⁷⁸ Chattopadhyay, B. (1986). ‘Bangadesher Krishak’, Vividha Prasanga, *Bankim Rachanavali*. Kolkata:Tuli-kalam, p. 288

⁷⁹ Tagore, R. (1990). ‘Bilaser Fansh’, *Samaj, Rabindra Rachanabali Vol. (13)*. Kolikata: Pashchimbanga Sarkar, p. 394

According to Rabindranath, the industrial expansion of the British not only increased the poverty of the peasants but also dominated the Indian sub-continent and made Indians slave with this machinery industry. In his words: “...by using whose clothes you feel comfortable, by playing whose harmonium you seem thrilled, by watching whose railways and telegraphs you become amazed, whether any relationship you have or not with them, you must be their slave. My belief about British industry is firm, that half of its dominion in this country is due to railways and steamers, because common people always see these and find them amazing. So, our own strength, rage, and pride are lost to it.”⁸⁰ Sri Dhammananda Mahabharati, in his article *Hindur Bhabi Dasha*, mentioned that, “when there were no railway, telegraph, or post office to adorn your new India, we ate one maund of rice, two and a half kg of ghee at the cost of one rupee. Now in your advanced India, we can't eat even one meal with a full appetite.”⁸¹

It is clear from the above that the Bengali society in both rural and urban areas witnessed a change, however, like all change, it was both for the better and worse. Bengali people were attracted by alluring expensive western items. With the introduction of the railways, the likes, dislikes, manners, dress, behaviour, and speech, of rural Bengal underwent a change. The pipkins and pitchers were replaced by aluminium pots. The bangles, made up of glass, started to adorn the hands of women along with *shankha* and *pola*. Young boys and girls abandoned the *madrassa* and *pathshala* of certain communities and hurried off to modern school. The grains made by pedal husking were replaced by grains prepared by machines. *Guru mashai* and *maulavis* made way for teachers. Village lads had the chance to travel to Calcutta and other cities to study.⁸² Eventually, the expense of maintaining the entire family rose. These rising expenses forced the family members to leave farming and relocate to the metropolis in order to find extra employment. Since the railways were an important industry which created jobs, hence, it was indirectly responsible for the socio-economic scenario of Bengal.

⁸⁰ *Samayik Sahitya Samalochana*, <https://rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/9075>

⁸¹ Mahabharati, D. (1901). ‘Hindur Bhabi Dashaa’, *Bharati*, Bha-Pou, p.573

⁸² Mitra, P. (2016). *Somajchitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil publishers, p.103

4.4 Train Travel and Social Transformation through Bengali Prose and Narratives

A noticeable change that has been frequently mentioned in many prose and Bengali narrations is the dilution of the caste system. Using railways as a mode of travel, broke the barriers of caste distinctions. This was reflected in a Bengali proverb, “*Jaar marlo teen sene/ Keshab Sene, station e ar Wilson e*” which means ‘three Senses- Keshav Sen, Rail Station, and Wilson—ruined the caste system in Bengal’.⁸³ This social change was not easy to come by. For instance, at an early stage a request seems to have come forth from the elites and the upper caste members of the society, to arrange separate seating arrangements in the train compartment and also in the railway waiting rooms for different communities and castes. For instance, in 1874, a ‘Hindu’ traveller wrote in a newspaper condemning the train travel of upper caste people with sweepers, *chamars*, and other lower class/caste people in the train.⁸⁴ This further gets reflected through a literary work titled, ‘*Model Bhagini*’ by Jogendra Chandra Basu. The work is extremely important for understanding the rigid social structures of the precolonial and colonial centuries. The text describes the plight of a Brahmin who had to carry his heavy luggage weighing 37.32 kg or one *maun*. This was because that he could not find any same caste porters. He also had to buy a second class ticket (which was more expensive) as he was afraid that the third class compartment would pollute his caste due to the presence of passengers from diverse backgrounds.⁸⁵ The above accounts make it clear how difficult it was to let go of the rigid caste practices. Some narratives also reflect the regional diversities that the passengers had to face in the trains. For instance, in the novel *Model Bhagini*, the author portrays a heated discussion between a Punjabi and a Bengali. Here each person expresses disdain at the alleged weakness of the traits of other regional communities. This displayed uneasiness that people faced when travelling outside their regional realms.⁸⁶ Besides the caste and regional differences, train travel also highlighted on occasions some communal differences. Though trains did not provide separate spaces on the basis of community, Bengali narratives do mention separate waiting rooms for Hindus and Muslims. According to Jogendra

⁸³ Mitra, P. (2016). *Somajchitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil publishers, p.108

⁸⁴ Ibid. p.106

⁸⁵ Basu, J. C. (1976). *Model Bhagini*. Kolkata: Sri S. Mallick, pp. 315-16

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Singh, water serving stalls were labelled as Hindu or Muslim at railway stations.⁸⁷ This meant that since the Hindus would not partake water from the Muslim boys, therefore, it was ensured that the Hindus would provide water to the Hindu passengers. Separate seating areas for Hindus and Muslims were also observed in most railway stations. Despite this, travelling via train acted as a melting pot of people coming from all walks of life.⁸⁸ Caste distinctions became less rigid. This can be discerned from the statement of an unknown writer. He writes that “although the scriptures contain very strict language and we may make a big fuss about it, we have no choice but to travel on the train together with people of thirty six castes and drink water.”⁸⁹ Communal differences also blurred with time. Gajendra Kumar Mitra’s story *Prem Kutil Dwanda* describes how a Muslim boy was saved by a Hindu Brahmin from very cold weather. Dhires Narayan Chakraborty a Hindu Brahmin, saved Maqbul Hussain, a Muslim boy, by pulling him into his lap at the Mokama station and wrapping him tightly in his warm blanket. The mother of Maqbul in gratitude, touched his feet several times.⁹⁰ The class divisions also were seen getting blurred around the railway stations. For instance, Muslim shopkeepers were selling lemonade and soda water, which was consumed by people from different classes and communities including Europeans.⁹¹

It is a well established fact that the Bengali society was affected when it came in contact with the modern westernised English culture. Bengalis were believed to be the first ones to adapt the western mannerisms and change their lives according to that. For instance, instead of partaking Isabgol, sugar cubes, *batasa*- water (water with Indian sweet), and coconut water which provided relief to the stomach in the hot, tropical Indian weather, Bengalis preferred taking lemonade and soda water prepared by Muslim people just like their European counterparts.⁹²

There was also behavioural change noted by Bengali narrators and prose writers. Bengalis were known to carry out philosophical discussions which were profound and deep. However, according to *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*, this changed with the introduction of modern infrastructure in

⁸⁷ Appasamy, A. J., Singh, S. J. and et al. (1945). *The Cultural Problem*, Oxford's Pamphlets on Indian Affairs, No.1. India: Oxford University Press, pp. 59-60

⁸⁸ Mitra, G. K. (2000). ‘Trainer Jatri’, *Shanti Parva*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers, p. 67

⁸⁹ Anonymous, (1916). ‘Chalti Bhasha’, *Bharati*, Ashad, 1916, p.343

⁹⁰ Mitra, G. K. (2000). ‘Prem-Kutil-Dwanda’, *Shanti Parva*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers, p. 98

⁹¹ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, p.116

⁹²Ibid.

Bengal. The discussion revolved around ‘shallow matters’ such as Company’s paper, savings account, and salary hikes and things like how to please their bosses. Going to the theatre became fashionable and the words that were spoken were only ‘boos’ and ‘cheers’.⁹³

Devaganer Mortye Agaman, observes more societal change, brought about disruption of the traditional joint family system. Staying in joint families was not conducive along with not being fashionable and therefore led to the evolution of a modern nuclear family. The lower clerks were not well paid, and they had to travel to the urban areas leaving families in the village. Added to this was the fact that their jobs were not secure. In order to fit in, they had to give up their older values and adopt newer ones. The railway job was believed to be ‘like dew on the lotus leaf and like cholera disease,’ which was temporary in nature., because of their appointment with the private railway companies. At times, the clerks after coming to the office, would be informed that they didn't have a job anymore.⁹⁴ To secure their jobs and to promote themselves to higher grades, they were forced to use unethical means. The railway employees also had to follow protocols based on hierarchy. For instance, when officials were invited to family functions, they had to go in the face of humiliation for the sake of promotions. They were seated according to the positions that they held or by the salaries that they were paid. Food would also served on the basis of the position that they held. This sort of a discriminatory behaviour has been noted in few Bengali narratives. For instance, in the book *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*, Kashi Babu, who received a salary of Rs. 59, took out one rupee from his pocket, kissed it, and said, “Oh money, I wish my salary would increase up to 60 rupees!”⁹⁵ The desire to be promoted to a higher position constantly forced the employees to conduct their behaviour in a certain fashion even if it meant giving up on their values. The discriminatory hierarchy also was extended to the perks or benefits that the railway employee would get. The clerk who was paid 80 rupees was allowed a second class train pass, whereas those who were paid less than eighty rupees per month would only get the intermediate classes pass. Those employees who were paid less than eighty rupees were restricted to avail free third class travel only. Most of the time, people felt cheated and disappointed at such discrimination. For instance, *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*, mentions of a clerk *babu* of Jamalpur station, received a

⁹³ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, p.119

⁹⁴ Ibid. pp.118 & 130

⁹⁵ Ibid. p.116

salary of 40 rupees, was unable to travel by the second class and relax on the soft cushioned berth with his spouse despite him promising her the same.⁹⁶

Another socio-cultural change that was noted by the Bengali narrators and prose writers was that railways facilitated integration by connecting different regions and communities. However, these connections by railway network did not necessarily result in significant changes in social attitudes or caste-based discrimination immediately. While railways may have provided some opportunities for mobility and exposure, it did not fundamentally challenge or dismantle the deeply ingrained caste-based discrimination and social hierarchy that prevailed in colonial Bengal. Railways continued to be the epitome of colonial control where discriminations were made on the basis of colour, caste and creed. Railway reports prove that the maximum job opportunities were provided to the Hindus, and higher ranks were only for the British and Anglo Indian employees. This is evident in Year Books of the Railway Board during the colonial period. Compartments continued to be reserved separately for white passengers. The caste system continued to be a deeply rooted social issue that required broader social, cultural, and political transformations beyond the influence of railways.

4.5 Railways and Women: Journeys of Empowerment

Prior to the development of railways, cultural norms and practices limited and impeded women's travel. However, trains provided a new form of transportation that empowered women to travel on their own and discover the world outside their narrow private spaces. Women got the liberty to leave their conventional boundaries and interact with the outside world due to this newfound mobility. Many literary texts and prose wrote on this newfound freedom that allowed women to travel more frequently. The expression of a woman travelling for the first time can be understood through the eyes of the character of Indu in a story 'Joler Alpana' published in a journal titled, *Bharati*. Indu had never travelled outside her city. The story depicts the portrayal of a village when Indu travels in the train. It showcases that Indu could only travel through railways, as probably it

⁹⁶ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing p.155

was considered safer by her parents. The story portrays how railways became a medium through which women could broaden their horizons.⁹⁷

The railways provided Bengali women with a newfound sense of independence and elevation. They no longer had to rely solely on male relatives to accompany them on their travels. Women could embark on journeys alone or with other female companions, making their own decisions and taking charge of their mobility. This newfound independence fostered a sense of self-reliance and empowerment among Bengali women. This can be discerned from a prose written by Rabindranath Tagore, titled, '*Aparichita*' in 1916, when travelling by train was no longer considered abnormal. The prose showcases how travelling by train was seen as an expression of liberation for women by Tagore. '*Aparichita*; (stranger) aka Kalyani, the hero of the prose, is made out to be stronger than her male counterpart in every manner. She is shown travelling alone (without any male or female chaperone) and is aware her rights. This sort of knowledge came from the fact that she was educated and knew of her rights. She understood that if she had the ticket of the first class compartment, then by law no one could really ask her to leave. The love story interwoven into the narrative is indicative of Kalyani as being a very conscientious young woman. The fact that she could converse in Hindi as well as English showcases that women were equipped to travel by train to longer distances. She knew that she was on the right and therefore did not hesitate to refuse the pressure to leave her reserved compartment even when forced by the '*British Sena*' and railway officials.⁹⁸

Rail travel allowed Bengali women to connect and network with other like-minded individuals. They could establish contacts, build alliances, and find support systems beyond their immediate communities. This empowered Bengali women to challenge societal norms and overcome obstacles. Earlier, it was not possible to talk with any male individual easily but railways gave the space and scope to find compatible individuals. For instance in the story '*Namhara Swapno*,' by Gajendra Kumar Mitra, two young, unknown female and male passengers have been found introducing themselves by breaking through their awkwardness in a train compartment. The boldness and vanity of the girl rather surprised the boy. The enunciation, "Everyone stares at me

⁹⁷ Roy, H. (1918). 'Joler Alpana', '*Bharati*', Ashad, 1325 B.S. (c.1918), p.134

⁹⁸ Tagore, R. (2003). '*Aparichita*', *Galpogucch*. Kolkata: Sahityam, pp. 646-648

because, naturally, I have a really beautiful body”- rather annoyed the boy. Seeing her arrogance, the boy uttered, “Is this not a very modern girl?” However, later, they became more frank and intimate and talked the whole night.⁹⁹ Romanticism, boldness, and vanity were not easily expressed outside the limits of marriage at that time, but the train compartment created a room for all those social breakthroughs. Space within the train allowed the women to think more freely and behave more courageously. Travelling by train was associated with being part of a changing world and breaking away from conservative traditions. Bengali women who embraced rail travel were seen as progressive and forward-thinking individuals. This perception of modernity instilled a sense of confidence and boldness among those who chose to travel by train.

Railways not only provided women with the means to travel longer distances more easily and quickly but created opportunities to explore and exploit the public spaces to their advantage. This was more true for women belonging to lower castes and communities. They often found work as labourers, porters, or domestic workers in railway-related activities. In that process many women left their villages in search of work around the railway line or railway station. For instance, the women of Kaharpara, are portrayed as crossing the rural-urban divide in search of work in ‘*Hansuli Banker Upakatha*’. When the railway line was started in Chandanpur, the girls of the village were given many opportunities to work. At times women took advantage and broke the shackles of patriarchy creating an uproar in the minds of patriarchs. Korali's mother in the novel *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* was one such character, who found work along with love. She ran away with her lover who was working at the railway station, leaving her children behind. The villagers and the headman criticised her and cursed the railways for spoiling their women. The novel mentions other women such as Pachi, Khuki, Bele, Nirmala, Sidhu, and Jagaddhatri who also found work around the railway line and learned to live independently. This brought positive changes in the lives of these women and due to this they were not willing to go back to their old life despite great pressure from the villagers. Even when the village chief went to bring Sidhu back, Sidhu refused to return. Pakhi learned to speak English like *Mem Sahib* while staying in the coolie quarter of the railway line. She often came to the village and mimicked *Mem Sahibs*.¹⁰⁰ It is important to note

⁹⁹ Mitra, G. K. (2000). ‘Namhara Swapno’, *Shanti Parva*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, pp. 61-66

¹⁰⁰ Bandopadhyay, T. (1851). ‘Hansuli Banker Upakatha’, *Tarasankar Rachanabali*, Vol. vii. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, pp.208 & 244

that the extent of these changes varied depending on factors such as socio-economic status, geography, and cultural norms. While railways opened up new possibilities for some women in colonial Bengal, they also perpetuated and reinforced existing gender inequalities, and access to these opportunities was often limited and unevenly distributed.

4.6. Railway Compartment and Cultural Synergy

Train compartments in India have always served as a cultural melting pot where people from various regions, religions, and backgrounds come together. As passengers travel across different states and regions, they bring with them their distinct cultural practices, languages, cuisines, and traditions. Interactions within the train compartment expose individuals to a rich tapestry of Indian culture, offering a glimpse into the diversity and unity of the country. India is known for its linguistic diversity, with numerous languages spoken across the country. In a train compartment, one can encounter conversations in different languages. This linguistic diversity presents an opportunity to experience and learn about different languages and dialects, contributing to a broader understanding of India's linguistic heritage. This aspect of the train travel has also been observed in Bengali prose and narratives. For instance, the short story, '*Trainer Jatri*' by Gajendra Kumar Mitra who in his introduction calls India is a miniature version of the world and the train compartment a pocket edition of India. By way of an example he says that in the train compartment that he was writing about, it looked like a medium room, passages in between, and four benches on both sides. He describes the compartment as, *On a bench on one side, a Punjabi woman fell asleep, her son and husband sitting beside her. Right in front of them, there are a few Oriya women sitting like a heap on one bench. Between benches, on the passage, two male and female guardians are sitting on the heap of their luggage. Next to it, on the two benches, several Marwari men and women are lying on the luggage. On the other side, on one of the four benches, there are four Kabuliwalas (people of Kabul) and one Nepali. In front of it, a Punjabi Muslim is lying comfortably with his eyes closed as if there is no one in the compartment. A Gujarati boy somehow stuck his body under his feet. On the remaining two benches, a few Bengali women were very busy saving their lives and castes with their children and households. Everything from milk to blankets for the terrible winter was brought and spread around. One of them spread a dirty cloth on another's lap,*

*and prepared betel leaves while trying to avoid contact with the Muslim gentleman behind. A few tribal people are sitting on the wide road in the middle of two rows of benches loaded with goods. This is seemingly a perfect picture of mini India within a railway compartment.*¹⁰¹ (translation mine)

Train journeys in India often witness impromptu musical performances and storytelling sessions. Passengers bring musical instruments and sing folk songs, showcasing the diverse folk traditions of different regions. This adds to the cultural experience within the train compartment, where fellow travellers get exposed to the rich musical heritage and storytelling traditions of India. Gajendra Kumar Mitra's *Trainer Jatri* portrayed the different travelling experiences of the passengers in the train. While describing the scene, he writes, a Marwari passenger took down a *hookah*, a pipe for smoking tobacco consisting of a water container and a long pipe, and started singing. In the cultural synergy that people experienced because of the musical performance, it overshadowed the differences of opinions or cultural differences that people in the compartment might have had. The singing by the Marwari passenger overpowered the noises made by the fight of a Tribal woman and an Oriya woman.¹⁰² Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay's book *Pathchalti*, describes that train compartments offered a platform for cultural harmony. A unique example of this cultural symbiosis was seen by the writer in the third class carriages on the train journey to Dhaka. In the compartment most of the passengers were Muslims along with few Hindus. The writer observed that the Muslims engaged in a *shero-shayari* (poetry) session and sometimes broke into a song. They even sang a *Baramashya* (a tradition of Bengali mediaeval poetry). He also observed that on occasions the Hindu passengers also joined in and he even mentions a Muslim boy singing a *bhakti geeti* (devotional song). Suniti Kumar writes, *I enjoyed the scene inside the third class compartment with all my heart and mind without them noticing. These people are heathens; their culture is different from ours, and it was not visible even in dreams to see such a situation. I felt how naturally these people, forgetting the miseries of the train journey, and all the pains of the world, adapting the train journey to suit their surroundings, happily relished the music*

¹⁰¹ Mitra, G. K. (2000). 'Trainer Jatri', *Shanti Parva*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh publishers, pp. 67-68

¹⁰² Ibid.

and poetry at the same time. Caste forgets the past differences and expresses this mutual cultural melding.¹⁰³(translation mine)

Train compartments also offered a unique experience of savouring different cuisines, as passengers shared and enjoyed regional delicacies during long-distance travel. The availability of local snacks, street food, and regional specialties in train compartments allows passengers to savour the diverse culinary traditions of India. This culinary exchange fostered cultural appreciation and understanding among passengers.¹⁰⁴

The Bengali narratives also mention how train compartments provided an opportunity for the passengers to learn from each other. In a short fiction by Pramatha Chowdhury titled, "*Sahayatri*," an Englishman discusses his pursuit of understanding numerous manifestations of Kali Mata with the Bengali co-passenger. On the other hand the Bengali co-passenger explained to him the philosophy of tantrism and thus the train compartment provided a room for imparting and partaking of knowledge.

Manik Bandopadhyay referring to train compartments as a 'pocket edition of whole India and its culture" highlights the encapsulation of diverse cultural elements within a confined space. It signifies the essence of Indian culture, unity in diversity and the remarkable coexistence of different traditions and practices within the country.¹⁰⁵ Bengali writers further elicited the significance of train compartments in their work. Ashapura Devi (1909-1995) a Bengali writer in her work *Koto Kando Rail Gaadite*, enumerates the feelings and emotions that were exchanged in the railway compartment, including sharing tiffin, sharing food, soothing their thirst with their water bottle, helping each other with a spare blanket, and swinging other's infant to provide temporary relief to the mother. She writes how a female's or mother's experience of travelling in the train differed from that of the men. Females tended to help each other out, especially when they were travelling with children or infants.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Chattopadhyay, S. (1964). 'Namaji', *Pathchalti*. Kolkata: Mayukh Basu, Grantha Prakash, pp. 92-93

¹⁰⁴ Bandopadhyay, M. (2007). 'Duti Jatri', *Manik Bandopadhyay Rachana Samagra*. Kolkata: Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, pp. 331-335

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Devi, A. (1985). *Koto Kando Rail Gaadite*. Kolkata: Sashadhar Prakashani, pp. 9-10

Bengali narratives also write about the traveller's experiences which were representative of their concerns with the political and social changes. Some of the regular commuters grew close enough to feel a sense of kinship with one another that they felt compelled to share their thoughts and ideas and discuss the deteriorating morals and values they saw in the older generation. Daily commuters would often get to know each other so well that they occasionally invited each other home. *Trame*, a short story, by Manik Bandopadhyay is significant in this context. In the story two commuters are heard discussing how disrespectful some are towards older and female travellers. They discuss young men who dare to cast lewd glances at female passengers standing next to them instead of showing any respect for them, which was a sign of degeneration of their values.¹⁰⁷ Trains and trams were and are massive carriers that provide pace and space to impart knowledge, exchange ideas, learn languages and cultures, and increase social contacts that make society progress.¹⁰⁸

4.7 Railway Tracks Towards Linguistic Convergence

Novel as a genre emerged in the nineteenth century alongside changes in the infrastructure such as railways and the telegraph which brought about rapid pace and progress in life.¹⁰⁹ Railways facilitated connectivity and integration. The expansion of rail networks brought previously isolated areas into closer contact with one another. The increased physical connectivity created opportunities for people from diverse linguistic backgrounds to interact, communicate, and exchange ideas. The integration fostered by railways bridged linguistic barriers and reduced linguistic disparity. In this respect Shri Paresh Nath Bandopadhyay's essay '*Bharater Jati Gathan*' is mentioned. Bandopadhyay observed that railways were in a way instrumental in popularising Bengali as the standard dialect of Bengal literary genre. The railways played a dual role firstly, popularising or standardising Bengali dialect; and secondly exposing the Bengalis to other rich dialects of various regions in and around Bengal.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Bandopadhyay, M. (2000). 'Trame', *Manik Bandopadhyay Rachana Samagra*. Kolkata: Paschim Banga Bangla Academi, pp. 225-228

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 227

¹⁰⁹ Basu, S. D. (1894). 'Bangla Upanyaser Bisheshatwa', *Nabyabharat*, Vol. 12, 4th no, Sravan, 1894, p.179

¹¹⁰ Bandopadhyay, P. (1901). 'Bharater Jati Gathan', *Bharati*, Bha-Pou, 1308 B. S.(c.1901), p. 269

Railways required a standardisation communication system. Common languages, such as English, Hindi, or regional languages were adopted for ticketing, signage, announcements, and other communication purposes. This standardisation of communication helped bridge linguistic gaps and create a common understanding among diverse passengers. It facilitated smoother interactions and overshadowed rich linguistic diversity. Linguistic convergence due to railway communications was not immediate or absolute, the progress and development facilitated by railways created an environment that had the potential to bridge linguistic gaps. Improved connectivity, economic development, standardisation of communication, language learning, literary exchanges, and language advocacy were steps towards breaking linguistic barriers and fostering a more inclusive linguistic landscape.

5. Empire and Railways: Arrogance and Responses

The following section focuses firstly on the racial discrimination and exploitation faced by non-European railway employees and secondly the role of railways to spread the vive of nationalism..

5.1 Empire's Hubris: A Tale of Imperial Arrogance

Introduction of railways enhanced mobility and sped up economic development, but also widened social gaps and inequalities. The railway building was viewed as a demonstration of British engineering strength and technological innovation. The British took pride in introducing modern infrastructure to India, considering it a sign of their superior civilization. The railways were frequently presented as a symbol of British development and a means of "civilising" the Indian populace. There was a clear cut discrimination by the railway officials against the locals. For instance, in a novel titled '*Pratham Prahar*', by Ramapada Chowdhury, portrays the discriminatory policy of the British people. He goes on to say that,.. *The railways in India were initially designed with separate compartments and seating arrangements for Europeans and Indians. The racial and socioeconomic hierarchies of colonial society were represented in this division. The British perceived themselves as superior and maintained strict divisions between themselves and the Indian population, further fueling prejudices and reinforcing notions of racial*

*superiority. Numerous literary traditions demonstrate this form of racism and class inequality in Indian railway systems.*¹¹¹ (Translation Mine)

Similarly, Durga Charan Roy in '*Devaganer Martye Agaman*' argued that even if the Gods were to come to the earth and travel in the train they would be discriminated against. He explains that when God Varun, along with his co-passengers, God Brahma, Narayana, Shiva, and others were stopped from entering the waiting room by the railway peon. Upon asking why they were stopped, the peon pointed towards a sign which read 'Waiting room for gentlemen.' Since the Gods were not English gentlemen, they were not allowed to enter. He also told them that the Englishmen did not permit entry of those individuals who do not wear shoes and turban. For this reason, government servants covered their heads with '*pagdi*'.¹¹²

Another Bengali writer Jogendranath Basu in his work '*Model Bhagini*', uses the analogy of caste divisions of Hindu society to explain the racial and class discrimination reflected in the categorisation of railway compartments in the first, second, third and coolie classes. Presuming the Englishmen as the upper three castes i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, all the Hindus were implied as Shudras while travelling by train.¹¹³ Basu justifies this by providing an example of the famous incident of Mahatma Gandhi being thrown out of the first class compartment in spite of holding a ticket of that class. He further writes that the first class compartments were generally reserved for the British and the Anglo Indian people. The Indian passengers preferred to shift to other compartments in spite of having first class tickets due to racial abuse and harassment of the British passengers. This is portrayed perfectly by Anupam of '*Aparichita*'.¹¹⁴

Devaganer Martye Agaman shows that on multiple occasions Bengalis had to face humiliation at the hands of the English or Anglo-Indian railway officers. For example, a group of people holding third class tickets unknowingly attempted to board a second class compartment at Jamalpur Station. They were unaware that they could not board the compartment. Instead of being politely

¹¹¹ Chowdhury, R. (1988). 'Pratham Prahar', *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p. 40

¹¹² Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, pp. 21-22

¹¹³ Basu, J. (1893). *Model Bhagini*. Kolkata: Sri Keval Ram Chattopadhyay, p.101

¹¹⁴ Tagore, R. (2003). 'Aparichita', Galpoguccha, *Rabindra Rachanabali*. rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org, retrieved on 8/6/23.

told to get down they were punched by an Anglo-Indian passenger because they did not have second class tickets.¹¹⁵ The newspaper and magazine published several reports regarding this inhuman behaviour, which has been discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Many Bengali narratives and prose discuss the impact of racial discrimination in railways on common people. One such satire is '*First Class Bhoot*,' written by Pramatha Choudhury (1868-1946). Here the narrator was travelling in an empty first class compartment. He met with a British gentleman who came out of the bathroom of that compartment. The officer as soon as saw him, started yelling and told him to get down. After much pleading, the narrator was allowed to stay, but was asked to take a bath as his clothes and body smelt bad. He also was told to remain in the bathroom for the rest of the journey. He called himself a senior railway officer. The narrator had no choice but to take a bath on a cold winter night. Adding to his discomfort, his clothes, which had hung on the window to dry, flew away, leaving him naked and cold. When he tried to open the bathroom door, he found the door was locked. When the train reached Burdwan, he drew the attention of people on the platform to let him out. A policeman opened the latch and turned on the light, saw him naked and ran away, thinking he was a ghost. Finally, the station master came and, believing him to be a thief, beat him. Despite protests, the narrator was dragged on to the platform and was further humiliated. Eventually when he was able to get the word in he explained what had happened to him. Unfortunately his story was considered as a lie as the 'senior railway officer' was at Shimla at that time. Apparently, the English passenger had lied. Ironically it turned out that the English officer was not a person but a ghost. The author, of course, justifies and further explains that as there were no ghosts in real life, the person either must have been another officer posing as the 'senior railway officer or in case, if there actual ghosts then, as a ghost, the British people also behaved with Indian passengers inhumanely.¹¹⁶ In *Bonhibanya*, Gajendra Kumar Mitra depicts a similar picture wherein Mrityunjoy, a character of the story, was forced to travel by foot

¹¹⁵ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Mortye Agaman*. Kolkata:Dey's Publishing, p.170

¹¹⁶ Chowdhury, P. (1941). 'First Class Bhoot', *Pramatha Chowdhury Galpo Sngraha*. Kolikata: Ranajit Roy, Visvabharati, pp. 412-413

by his wife despite the facility of a train. This was because his wife had heard that the Indians who travelled by train were often beaten by the railway officers.¹¹⁷

5.2 Railways and Nationalism

The railways had become an essential mode of travel and had integrated Bengal's various areas, linking towns, cities, and villages to form a more extensive transit system. The easy movement of people, ideas, and things also promoted a sense of common identity. This further allowed dissemination of nationalist ideas and fostering a sense of unity among Bengali nationalists. Trains had played a variety of roles in the nationalist movement in India. As the train fastened all the nationalist leaders together in one thread, it also played an important role in spreading the ideology of the nationalist leaders from one region to another. It helped in completing various revolutionary activities very quickly, especially in Bengal, as it was the centre of one of the most important nationalist activities at that time. Somewhere trains became the witness of agitation, somewhere it became the victim or target to show the anger smoked within the nationalist convulsion. Political leaders, intellectuals, and activists travelled via railways to attend meetings, conferences, and political rallies, spreading nationalist ideologies and connecting different parts of Bengal.

Paresh Nath Bandopadhyay in his essay, *Bharater Jaati Gathan*, has rightly said that “the railways, steamers, telegraphs, and post office—these four inventions, as four parts of western civilization—have made strangers friends, the foreigner into a neighbour. He further mentions that faster communication reduced the distance between Now Delhi is not so far from Lahore as was the distance between Dhaka and Chattagram earlier. So today, the whole of India is meeting at the call of the great national assembly.”¹¹⁸

Nationalism, revolution, and the freedom movement were some of the main themes of the literature, newspapers, and other narratives of the colonial period. There are many novels and short stories that were written in the context of the freedom Movement in India. For instance, ‘*Kuhelika*’, written by Kazi Nazrul Islam, depicts the backdrop of the revolutionary movement of

¹¹⁷ Mitra, G. K. (1954). ‘Banhibonya’, *Gajendra Kumar Mitra Rachanavali*, Vol-3. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, p .2

¹¹⁸ Bandopadhyay, P. (1901). ‘Bharater Jaati Gathan’, *Bharati*, Bha- Pou, 1901, p.168

the 1930s. Several characters in the book, including Jahangir, Pramatta, and Champa carried out revolutionary activities around the railway stations and trains. In order to fool the British Police, Pramatta assumed different identities sometimes as a Parsi gentleman and at times as Muslim preacher to deceive the police. Unfortunately Jahangir got captured after stepping off the train at Raniganj. This implied that the railway platforms such as Howrah platform often served as the primary hub for monitoring the nationalist movement.¹¹⁹

Manik Bandopadhyay's *'Bridge'* is another story set in the backdrop of the last phase of Indian national movement and the aftermath of Second World War in the year 1946. The protest was staged by the aggrieved porters and railway workers against the atrocities of railway officers. The author sees this as a last phase of national movement in which the most stoic pillar of the British Empire, i.e. Railways gravitate towards the nationalist sentiment. Bandopadhyay mentions two reasons behind the protest - 1. torture and abuse by the British railway authorities, 2. scarcity of food and rise in price. The condition of railway workers and porters had deteriorated so much that porters were forced to sell their women to the British railway officers to survive. They had enough and this time they refused to give in to their demands. and gathered together in protest. The railway authorities fired guns and threw gas bombs at the protesters. In this chaotic situation a train arrived at the station from which a mass of passengers alighted right in the midst of the firing. Most of the injured passengers came back in the same train to Howrah. Some casualties were left at the station and at a local hospital. This angered them and they joined the protesters. The riots did not stop at that station; the news fueled the riots in the city of Calcutta as well.¹²⁰ The entire narrative depicts how railways, a symbol of British rule, were attacked by innocent bystanders or even the supporters of colonial rule.

6. Railways and Environmental Degradation

Environmentalists have investigated the ecological aspects of the Indian railways throughout the colonial era. A significant effort has been made to identify the causes of ecological deterioration in general and forest degradation in particular. It has been suggested that, among other things, the

¹¹⁹ Islam, K. N. (2007). *Kuhelika*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, pp. 312-13

¹²⁰ Bandopadhyay, M. (2009). 'Bridge', *Manik Bandopadhyay Rachana Samagra*, Vol. VI. Kolkata: Sachib, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, pp. 187-188

railway system was primarily responsible for altering the morphology of the Indian forest landscape.¹²¹ The impact of railways on forest history has been discussed in Chapter 3. Here the focus is laid on how it impacted the ecological morphology of Bengal, in Bengali narratives and prose, which rarely has been focused upon so far. Numerous literary works demonstrate that the consequences of the railway went beyond simply affecting the local forest dwellers rather it impacted the forest ecosystem. Along with this, the natural flow of rivers, air pollution, and noise pollution have all had an effect on the ecology since the introduction of railways.

Many Bengali literary narrations mention the discourse of the construction of bridges for railways and its impact on the environment. How the natural flow of the river Ganges was affected by manpower could be seen in the narration of “*Devganer Martye Agaman*” by Durgacharan Roy. From the very beginning of the narration, God Vraun describes the pathetic condition of Mata Ganga (river Ganga), who is mythologically personified as the daughter of the king of Himalaya and foster daughter of Brahma. The surging stream of the Ganges, which flowed at its own pace and whose nature moves at its own pace, was obstructed by English power. She was coerced into drifting wherever he pleased. “The flow that the elephant could not contain earlier has been overcome by the British. The British were abducting her as they wished, and had tied her near Howrah and Hoogly.”¹²² On this river, the first Jubilee Railway bridge was constructed in Bengal. The author attempted to convey to the reader through this narration the detrimental condition of the river's natural flow if it is interfered with by any human activity. In the short novella “*Mahananda*” by Narayan Gangopadhyay, this picture becomes clearer. Gangopadhyay speaks about the construction of railway bridges in North Bengal and their impact on natural water flows. He depicts how two bridges of the rail company had fallen like the nooses of a python. After cutting stones from the Himalayas, the wagons were filled with those stones, which were poured into the water of Mahananda. The impetus life force of the mountain river had been trying to remove those conglomerate stones for a long time. Spumy water from Mahananda growled with small furries.Then, like the wild elephant trapped in the pit who surrenders to be a pet, it also

¹²¹ Kumar, Ravi, V. M., *Railways and Forests: History of Railways and their Impact on Forest Policies of South India*, 1850-1900, https://ebrary.net/138295/economics/railways_forests_history_railways_their_impact_forest_policies_south_india_1850_1900#319122

¹²² Roy, D.(2001). *Devganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s publishing, p.12

surrenders to the mechanisation of the unruly man as the pet does. He says with great regret that not only one but two bridges were thought to be constructed on the Mahananda River to connect Engrej Bazaar in Malda district. He ended this discourse with: “Another iron shackle is being made in the near future”¹²³ This argument can be substantiated by recent scientific study which stated that rich structures no doubt facilitated railway transportation, however bridges can disrupt natural flow of rivers by causing rise in water level upstream of the bridge (afflux) which can threaten the stability of bridge and river banks.¹²⁴

There are many references which bring to light the dwindling profession and incomes of boatmen when faced with competition from railways. For example *Devaganer Martye Agaman* mentions the loss of livelihood around the water transport¹²⁵. The same argument could be found in *Economic History of India* by Romesh Chandra Dutt. He reports the loss of jobs for local people in the domestic transportation system.¹²⁶

Environmental impact of the introduction of railways can also be seen through the way the locomotives burned coal as fuel to generate steam to power the engine. Coal burning produced air pollutants, such as carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter. Particularly, in and around railway stations and along heavily travelled train lines, these pollutants contribute to air pollution. Narayan Gangopadhyay, in his work *Mantra Mukhar* writes, “Like a huge wild beast, the black poison of its breath spread from horizon to horizon as the train sped along.” Coal was the main fuel used in trains at that time. The train of black smoke emitted from the coal would spread along its course. This smoke greatly polluted the environment along its path. If there were any houses around, then the windows, doors, and glass frames also shook. Its long-lasting harmful aspects were visible in some places.¹²⁷ In the novel *Pather Panchali*, the writer

¹²³ Gangopadhyay, N. (1979). ‘Mahananda’, *Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanabali*. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, p.161

¹²⁴ Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India Under Early British Rule 1757-1837*. London Routledge & Kagan paul Ltd. p.312

¹²⁵ Roy, D. (2001). *Devaganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey’s publishing, p.13

¹²⁶ Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India Under Early British Rule 1757-1837*. London Routledge & Kagan paul Ltd. p.312

¹²⁷ Gangopadhyay, N. (1979). ‘Mantra Mukhar’, *Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanabali*. Kolkata: Mitra And Ghosh Pub, p.87

unwittingly focused on the environmental aspect of railways while describing how the coal dust from black smoke came out of a running train and got into Apu's eyes. It was not only coal smoke that polluted the environment, Durga learned from one of the books of Apu that there was no thatched house next to the railway line. This was because of a simple reason that the thatched house would be easily burned due to the fire that came out of the train.¹²⁸ The author also writes about visible air pollution that was caused by the soot and dense smoke that steam locomotives emitted. In and around railway stations and along railway tracks, fog and haze were caused by the emissions from these engines. Although, the author was not sensitised towards the long term problem such pollution would cause, yet, it would have affected the air quality for the author to make specific mention in the text. Railway tracks often passed through or near residential areas in colonial Bengal. The emissions from steam locomotives, including smoke and particulate matter, could have directly impacted the air quality in these areas. People living in close proximity to railway lines, especially in densely populated urban areas, would have been more exposed to the pollutants emitted by trains.

6.2 Impact on landscape of Bengal

The development of railways played a crucial role in the urbanisation of colonial Bengal. Railway lines connected major towns and cities, enabling the development and growth of metropolitan areas. Along the railway lines, new stations and colonies grew, luring settlers and aiding in the construction of urban infrastructure as depicted in *Devaganer Martye Agaman*.¹²⁹ The development of new buildings, highways, and commercial areas resulted in changes to Bengal's physical landscape. Santosh Kumar Majumder, a teacher in the Agriculture Department of the Visva Bharati University, wrote in his essay, '*Matir Upor Dashyubritti*' that people were oppressing the soil because of which it was losing its fertility; some people were forced to cultivate on new lands by clearing forests. Natural water drainage systems were being disturbed due to rapid construction activities. Unfortunately such banditry/'দস্যুবৃত্তি' on the land remained invisible to everyone. According to him, it was the city dwellers who oppressed the soil the most. Their houses were so densely packed that they had no land to grow their own vegetables. They built railways

¹²⁸ Bandopadhyay, B. (1929). *Pather Panchali*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh Publications, p.115

¹²⁹ Roy, D. (2001). *Devaganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata: Dey's publishing, p. 48

and highways across the country, putting farmers at risk. Examining the terrain in Birbhum, he claimed that before the construction of railways, the district's exports of products were carried out by bullock carts and vast river routes. *Gala*, indigo, silk, and cloth were exported from this district. These were ready-made goods, so they did not cause much oppression on the soil, but due to the construction of roads and railways, freight trains enter the alleys of cities and ports and empty the villages by taking grain stores from the villages, so the pressure on the village soil was increasing.¹³⁰ This expansion of agricultural activities impacted the rural landscape, as farmers adapted their practices to cater to the demands of the growing market. Due to the construction of railways, enormous jungles and forests had been cleared off, which caused soil erosion and affected the inhabitants of the region as well.

The construction of railways necessitated the development of infrastructure in colonial Bengal. This included the construction of railway tracks, bridges, tunnels, and stations, which required extensive land clearance and engineering work. These infrastructure developments altered the natural landscape, leading to changes in the topography of the region. In colonial Bengal, the railways were crucial in fostering industry and resource extraction. The improved transportation provided by railways facilitated the movement of raw materials, such as coal, jute, tea, and indigo, from the hinterland to the ports for export. Industries, such as textile mills, coal mines, and jute mills, emerged along the railway lines, transforming the landscape with the establishment of factories and associated infrastructure.

According to L. Sarkar the introduction and expansion of railways in Bengal during the colonial period had a significant impact on the region's forests. While the railways played a crucial role in facilitating transportation, trade, and economic development, their construction and operation had adverse effects on the forest ecosystem. The construction of railway tracks often required the clearance of large areas of forests. Trees were cut down to make way for the tracks, resulting in deforestation and the loss of valuable forest resources. This clearing of forests also led to habitat destruction and the displacement of wildlife.¹³¹ The demand for timber to build railway sleepers,

¹³⁰ Majumder, S. (1921). 'Matir Upor Dashyubritti', *Santiniketan*, 1st edition, Magh, 1921, p. 97

¹³¹ Sarkar, L. (2023). 'Oupanibeshik Banglay Paribesh O Janaswashthyer Upor Rail-Byabasthar Neti Probbab'. *Bhugol Swadeshgcharccha*, Vol. 2, July-Dec, 2023, pp 26-35

bridges, and other infrastructure components put additional pressure on the forests of Bengal. This led to overexploitation of timber resources, contributing to further deforestation and degradation of the forest ecosystem.¹³² The construction of railway lines often led to the establishment of railway colonies, stations, and workshops. As railway personnel and labourers settled around these areas, there was an increase in human settlements near forests. This led to encroachment and agricultural expansion into forested lands, further reducing forest cover. The fragmentation and destruction of forests due to railway construction disrupted wildlife habitats and migration patterns. As a result, many animal species faced population decline or local extinction, affecting the overall biodiversity of the region.¹³³

All of these aftereffects, while ignored by government documents, were depicted in a variety of ways in Bengali literary tradition. The series '*Devaganer Martye Agaman*' also focused on this issue. It has been mentioned in the text that 'In an earlier period, Jamalpur was a deep forest and the habitat of tigers and bears. Seeing the increasing number of workers in the Howrah workshop, the railway authority planned to shift the workshop and many offices from Howrah to Jamalpur, making the place a city by cutting the forest. Thus disrupting the ecology of the region.'¹³⁴ This is a clear indication that the environment was adversely affected when urbanisation took place. The reasons pointed out in the book are: 1. Forests are destroyed. The construction of a new settlement is carried out by clearing the forest area; 2. Changes in the natural landscape of new settlement, in this case, Jamalpur, and 3. Extinction of certain animals and dispersal of local inhabitants of jungle areas. 4. Soil erosion took place. Although the quantum of soil erosion and dryness of the area is not available.¹³⁵

Not only at Jamalpur, but in many other places such as Asansole, Raniganj, Sahebgunj; in the whole of North Bengal; Bankura, Birbhum, Manbhum, and Dhalbhum, where railway stations and junctions were built and around which the new localities had grown into mini towns. The quarters, the shops, markets, schools, and even hospitals were built around many big stations and junctions,

¹³² Sarkar, L. (2023). 'Oupanibeshik Banglay Paribesh O Janaswasthyer Upor Rail-Byabasthar Neti Probhab'. *Bhugol Swadeshgcharccha*, Vol. 2, July-Dec, 2023, pp 26-35

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Roy, D. (1984). *Devaganer Martye Agaman*. Kolkata:Dey's Publishing, p. 138

¹³⁵ Ibid. pp.138-72

in particular by clearing the forest and jungle area.¹³⁶ In “*Devaganer Martye Aagaman*” (1891), Durgacharan Roy has narrated that Jamalapur was full of jungle with wild animal earlier but after coming of railways that jungle area was cleared and rail workshops, schools, charitable hospital, community hall etc, were established.¹³⁷ He also narrated that Sahebganj was the district head office of railways; twenty years ago it was full of jungle; the roads were very clean and wide. Engrej Mahal was built in the cleared area. British railway guards stayed in that house. Engrej Mahal looks very beautiful. The narrative clearly exposes the matter of deforestation.¹³⁸

The railways had a huge impact on people’s health, bringing about both positive and negative changes. the railways facilitated healthcare services for people in remote areas of Bengal. It connected towns and cities, making it easier for patients to travel to hospitals and clinics. It expedited the transportation of medical professionals and medicines, enhancing healthcare availability and reducing barriers to treatment. In colonial Bengal, the railways contributed to public health efforts. To ensure cleanliness and hygienic conditions in train carriages and railway stations, the railway administration took appropriate action. Sanitary precautions were put in place such as maintaining a clean water supply and sanitation facilities within the trains and railway stations. Many annual reports of the railways provide evidence of the measures taken for the sanitization of trains, stations, and the surrounding vicinities of the railways. The important measures taken regularly were anti-malaria measures by malariologists. For example, the Report by the Railway Board of the year 1936-37 shows that anti-malaria work was enabled to a radius of half a mile beyond the outermost railway quarters every year. Anti- larva and anti-parasitic measures were also taken. The expenditure on installation of drains at Isurdi, amounted to R. 20,897, was one of the significant anti-malaria measures implemented. Larvicidal fish had been introduced to control the situation during the year. The policy of co-operating with various public bodies by carrying out anti-malaria work within railway premises and in their jurisdiction adjoining railway land was continued.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Roy, D.(2001). *Devaganer Martye Agama*. Kolkata: Dey’s publishing, pp.138-72

¹³⁷ Ibid. pp.138-39

¹³⁸ Ibid. p.170

¹³⁹ *Report by The Railway Board on Indian Railway for 1936-37*. Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1937, pp. 113-15

However, Bengali prose portrays the other side of the coin by pointing out that railways were responsible for causing the very diseases that it was taking measures to prevent. *Devaganer Martye Agaman* and other essays illustrate that the establishment of the railway network was also responsible for causing the spread of malaria and other infectious diseases. The railway embankments were an impediment to the natural water drainage systems leading to stagnated waters, a breeding place for malaria larvae. Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra, and many other literati raised their voices through their writings, which have been discussed in Chapter 3. The ‘*Gramavarta*’ and other newspapers and magazines were vocal about that. The land of India was becoming a mine of unsanitary conditions and malaria as the natural flow of water drainage was blocked due to railways.¹⁴⁰ Santosh Kumar Majumder, in his essay *Matir Upor Dashyubritti*, blamed the construction of railways as one of the causes of the rise of malaria.¹⁴¹ In the essay *Swasthya, Mrityu O Chikitsa*, Pravat Kumar Mukhopadhyay writes that, *the water in the country cannot move easily for the construction of railways above the high ground level. It can be understood well while travelling by train. If standing water has no outlet it is polluted, cholera and various stomach diseases appear at the very beginning of each rainy season.*¹⁴² The workers engaged in many railway projects also suffered from malaria and other infectious diseases. These infections spread further as their living conditions and sanitization were not taken care of properly. The Railway Report for the year 1937-38 shows that the health of the labour class in the construction area had been affected by malaria and smallpox, which delayed the construction.¹⁴³

It's essential to recognize that the impact of railways on Bengal's forests was complex and multifaceted. While railways contributed to economic growth and development in the region, the negative consequences on the environment, particularly the forests, were significant. Many of these impacts had long-term consequences, shaping the environmental landscape of Bengal even beyond the colonial era. In conclusion, the introduction of railways in colonial Bengal had far-reaching impacts on the environment, both positive and negative. While they stimulated economic

¹⁴⁰ Chakraborty, S. (Ed.). (2000). *Dui Shataker Bangla Sangbad Samayik Patra*. Kolkata: Binyas Word Works, p. 46

¹⁴¹ Majumder, S. (1921). ‘Matir Upor Dashyubritti’, *Santiniketan*, 1st edition, Magh, 1921, p. 97

¹⁴² Mukhopadhyay, P. (1921). ‘Swasthya, Mrtityu, O Chikitsa’, *Upasana*, Bhadra, 1921, p. 1005

¹⁴³ *Report by The Railway Board on Indian Railway for 1937-38*. Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1938, p.15

growth and modernization, their adverse effects on forests, wildlife, and natural resources call for reflection on the need for responsible development and environmental conservation.

Conclusion:

Railways had a multitude of effects, as Bengali writings and narratives demonstrate. With the exception of a few initial resentments Bengalis had embraced railroads as a marvel and a useful transport system. Not only did it facilitate the movement of commodities and people, but it also played a significant part in the sociocultural transformation of Bengal. Introduction of railways provided job opportunities which fostered the evolution of new social classes such as the *Babu* class. It also changed the urban landscape and had an impact on the rural locales leading to increased urbanisation. Train timetables and regulations changed Bengali people's lifestyle. Railways also provided scope to Bengali women to move beyond the confines of their homes and gave them exposure to the outside world and experience of public life. It played an important role in breaking rigid caste and communal barriers. The introduction of foreign goods into remote areas of Bengal sparked growing aspiration among the younger generation, prompting a shift towards urban life away from agriculture, thereby disrupting the agrarian production system. In addition, British colonial attitudes fostered a sense of subversion among Indians while reinforcing their superiority, leading to class divisions within the railway workforce. However, these British prejudices also served to unite the Indian population, as the railways facilitated the spread of nationalism among Bengalis. Furthermore, the impact of railways was seen having adverse impact on the ecology of Bengal, including its forests, water, and overall public health.