

CHAPTER 3

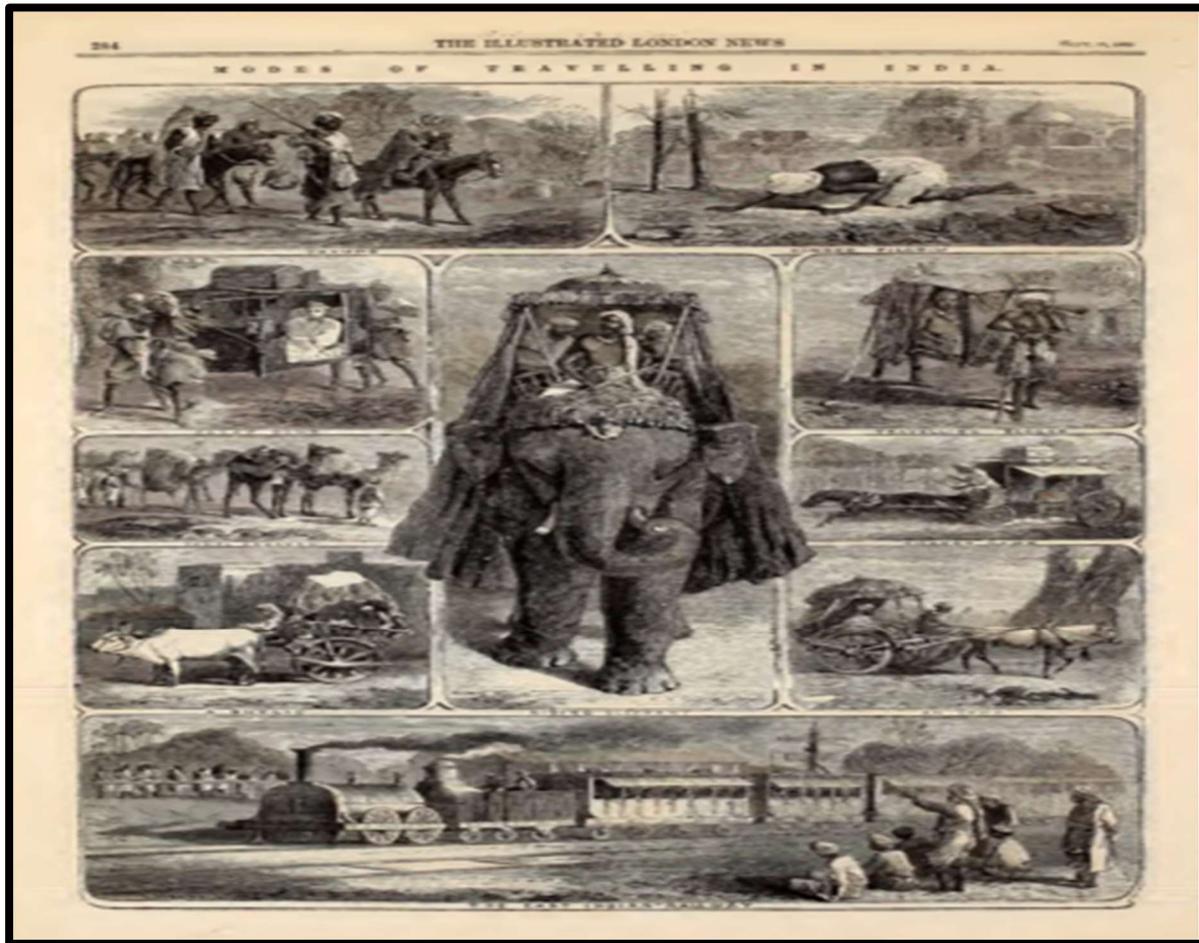
Adumbration of Railways in Print Media

This chapter focuses on representation of railways with reference to print media which includes newspapers, periodicals and journals meant for public circulation. When the railways were introduced in Bengal, most of the communications between the railways and the public were carried out through print media. Print media such as newspapers, periodicals and journals were published in both English and Bengali languages. They covered railways related issues to inform people of the changes in the society, hence print media played a very important role in representing the matters related to railway to common people and vice versa. Planning, proposals, future impacts, etc. were being published with due gravity from the beginning. It is noteworthy that the print media referenced in this study belonged to diverse ownership, including both British and Indian owners, occasionally in collaboration, offering a nuanced perspective and reflecting historical context. The subject matters included, responses and reactions of common people towards railways; incidents and accidents; and various types of crimes. The Print media therefore was actively involved in informing people, making them aware about the utility of railways and also of its negative impacts like economic extortion; destruction of the agrarian economy and small scale of industry; degradation of the environment; and working-class agitations, etc.

As has been discussed in the previous chapters, prior to the advent of railways, the larger society of Bengal was mainly village-centric, and self-sufficient and the pace of life was slow and rural in its orientation. However, in the second half of the 19th century, perceptible changes took place in the socio-cultural structures of Bengal as a result of the introduction of the railways.¹

¹ 'Travelling in India', *The Illustrated London News*, September 19, 1863, p. 283.

1. Railways and Print Media: Initial Reactions



Courtesy: *The Illustrated London News*, September 19, 1863, p.284

The first passenger train left Howrah on August 15, 1864, and the first stretch of the East Indian Railway opened to public traffic on that day, making it a day worth remembering. The opening of the East Indian Railway was marked by ‘red letter Day’ or a noteworthy day for technological and infrastructural progress.² The British introduced an invention that refashioned print media. The Bengali weekly *Sambad Bhaskar* penned just four days after the traffic train from Howrah to Hooghly began operating. It urged readers to ‘bow down to the white race at every step.’ The report additionally alleged that, even in the days of Ramachandra, people were not aware of such amazing

² G. H. (1908). ‘The Opening of The East Indian Railway’. *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. II, No.1, January 1908, p. 55

technology that had been created during the colonial era by the enlightened white race. It was only as a result of their might and slyness, that they won every battle.³ It is clear from the above that the Bengali print media initially favoured the introduction of railways and even celebrated the railway company officers as divine, so much so that they encouraged people to give up their antagonistic attitude towards Christianity.

Another newspaper *Sangbad Prabhakar*, (a daily) reported on 19th August 1854, regarding the logistical issues of the first train that ran in Bengal. The article said, “*Steam trains have been operating on the railway daily since last Tuesday, August 15th, and due to crowd Mr. R. McDonnell Stephenson, managing director of the railway company, was unable to issue tickets to those who wanted to board a train to travel to Bali, Srirampur, Chandannagar, and Hooghly. Tickets were issued according to the arrangement of seats available in the carriages, so from where would he hand out tickets if there were no seats? Almost 200 individuals have disappointedly written letters on the first day. According to our information, the number of trains will rise throughout the current month of August, and nobody will experience disappointment before the first of September. The first-class vehicles, which include palanquin-like beds and glass blinds and roofs, are the nicest among the three classes offered by the railways. It is comfortable for riders to sit in. Even the second-class carriage is not as horrible as it has a fixed seat for each passenger and a covering on its surface. Nevertheless, there is no roof nor a fixed seat in the third-class carriage, so passengers must either stand or sit. According to what we've heard, the third-class carriage will soon have a roof, and that will ease the passenger' misery.*”⁴(Translation Mine). The newspaper also published the fare to facilitate the passengers. The fare was as follows which has been reproduced here for a better understanding.

³ ‘Bashpiya Shakat’, *Sambad Bhaskar*, 19th August, 1854.

⁴ *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 4th Bhadra, 1261, (19th August, 1854).

সংবাদ প্রভাকর ।

লইনা
স্বাক্ষ
সমি
কটে
ডিড
না
হিত
পারি
পূর্ব
বৎ
নের
ইয়া
পরি
ছে,
কিট
গব
পাই

কে ক্ষান্ত করা যাইতেছে যে তাঁহার।
উল্লেখিত সুপ্রিমকোর্টের মার্কার শ্রীযু
ত ওয়াশ্‌টনের মরণান সাহেবের সমী
পে উক্ত সুপ্রিমকোর্টের গৃহে তাঁহার
দপ্তরখানার আগামি ১৯ আগষ্ট তা
রিখে অথবা তাহার পূর্বে উপস্থিত
হইয়া আপনাপন পাওনা সকল সমগ্র
মাণ করিবেন, যদিও না করেন তবে
উল্লেখিত অনুমতির স্বগমস্বচক উপা
য় মতে আপনাপন প্রাপ্য সম্পত্তি
হইতে নিশ্চিতরূপে বঞ্চিত হইবেন ।

JOHN COCKRANE.

Master.

জান, কাক্রেণ ।
মার্কার ।

Messrs. LYONS & BELL.
Campell Attorneys.

মিস্টার্স লায়ন্স এণ্ড বেল ।
বাদি পক্ষের উকীল ।
কলিকাতা ।
সুপ্রিমকোর্ট ।
মার্কার আফিস ।
১৯ জুলাই ১৮৫৪ ।

সংবাদ প্রভাকর

৪ ভাদ্র শকাব্দ ১৯২৩ । দ্বাদশাব্দ ১৯০৪ ।

মত ১৫ আগষ্ট মঙ্গলবার দিব
সাবধি প্রতিদিবস রেইলরোডে বা
শ্রী শকট গমনাগমন করিতেছে,
ঐ শকটে আরোহণ পূর্বক বালী
শ্রীরামপুর, চন্দননগর ও হুগলিতে
গমন করিবার অভিমানে রেইলওয়ে

মেকডোলেণ্ড স্ট্রিকেলস সাহেবের
সমীপে এত অধিক লোক উপস্থিত
হইতেছেন যে তিনি তাহারদিককে
টিকিট দিতে পারেন না, শকটে যত
স্থান আছে, তাহারই টিকিট প্র
স্তুত হইয়া থাকে, অতএব স্থান
না থাকিলে তিনি কোথা হইতে টিকি
ট দিবেন, প্রথম দিবসে আর ২০০
ব্যক্তি পত্র লিখিয়া হতাশ হইয়াছেন,
আমরা অবগত হইলাম যে বর্তমান
আগষ্ট মাসের মধ্যেই শকট সংখ্যা
বৃদ্ধি হইবেক, মেক্টরের মাসের প্রথ
মাবধি আর কোন ব্যক্তি হতাশ হই
বেন না, রেইলরোডে যে তিন প্রকার
শকট গমনাগমন করিতেছে, তাহার
মধ্যে প্রথম শ্রেণীর শকট অতি উত্তম
তাছাড়া পাণ্ডিত্যগোষ্ঠীর নাম বসিবার
গদি ও মাসি খড়খড়ি ও ছাদ আছে,
তাছাড়া আরোহিরা সুখে বসিয়া
বাইতে পারেন, দ্বিতীয় শ্রেণীর শকট
বদিও তাদূশ নহে তথাচ মন্দ বলা
যায় না, তাহার উপস্থিতাগে আজ
দম ও প্রত্যেক ব্যক্তির বসিবার নি
র্দিষ্ট স্থান আছে, কিন্তু তৃতীয় শ্রেণীর
শকটের ছাদ নাই, ও তাছাড়া আরো
হিগের বসিবার স্থানও নির্ধারিত
নাই যিনি সেখানে বসুন বা দণ্ডায়
মান থাকুন । আমরা প্রবণ করিলাম
স্বরায় ঐ শকটে ছাদ হইবেক, অধু
না, আরোহিদিগের যে ক্রেশ হইতে
ছে তাহাও অনেক নিবারণ হইবেক
প্রথম ক্রানের শকটে প্রত্যেক আ
রোহির প্রতি এইকপ মূল্য অর্থাৎ
তাত্তা নির্ধারিত আছে, যথা বালী,
১১- আনা । শ্রীরামপুর ১০- আনা ।
হুগলি ও তিনটাকা । দ্বিতীয় ক্রানে
বালী ১০- আনা ।

Class	From	To	Fare
Ist Class	Howrah	Bali	12 <i>anna</i>
	Howrah	Sree Rampore	1 <i>taka</i> , 8 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Chandannagar	2 <i>taka</i> , 8 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Hoogley	3 <i>taka</i>
2nd class	Howrah	Bali	5 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Sree Rampore	9 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Chandannagar	15 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Hoogley	1 <i>taka</i>
3rd class	Howrah	Bali	1 <i>ana</i> , 6 <i>paisa</i>
	Howrah	Sree Rampore	3 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Chandannagar	5 <i>ana</i>
	Howrah	Hoogley	7 <i>ana</i>

Table 1 Source : *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 4th Bhadra, 1261 (19th August,1854)

Sambad Bhaskar also reported that efforts were made by English railway officials to further generate interest in railway issues. For instance, Stephenson, the managing director of the railway company published 800 books (in English) describing railway construction and its usage. This was then sent to reporters and news publishers to generate interest in both wealthy individuals and common people in Calcutta and the surrounding areas.⁵ Besides publishing articles from the point of view of the imperialists, the newspapers also took care to represent people's perspectives. *Sambad Bhaskar* for example wrote of the experience of the passengers who were not able to travel in the first train. "Even after purchasing expensive tickets, passengers who wanted to travel from Howrah to Hooghly or those who wanted to go from Hooghly to Kolkata were unable to board the train. But others who were travelling from Howrah to Srirampur or Farasdanga for a short distance had already purchased tickets and boarded the train. As a result, individuals who paid a greater amount for their tickets were dissatisfied and went back home, which resulted in losses for both the company and the passengers. Moreover, it has occurred that customers who purchased tickets for lower classes attempted to board a higher-class compartment."⁶ The newspapers even urged the Company to resolve this situation and run the system safely without putting passengers in danger. A demand was made to run as many trains as quickly as possible. Some suggestions were also offered for avoiding the disasters.⁷ This shows that the print media was aware of its role in representing the resentment of the masses and helped the Company as well as the government in improving their standards so that the train travel could be a comfortable experience for its passengers.

Besides, speaking on behalf of the Bengali people, the newspapers of Bengal also noted and reported the responses of common people to the introduction of railways. It said that the people were fascinated by various aspects of railways such as its technique or the way it appeared. For instance, *Bengal Harkaru*, an English newspaper reported the amazement of people when the railway line was built using an iron rod. It also observed how people marvelled at the 'smoke

⁵ *Sambad Bhashkar*, 22nd August, 1854

⁶ 'Baspiya Sakat Samparkita', *Sambad Bhashkar*, 22nd August, 1854.

⁷ Ibid.

coming out' enormous 'snake-like body'; or how common people, both men and women, assembled on either side of the road, *salaamed* (saluted) 'the furious salamandrine in its course'.⁸ The paper reported that the railways challenged the taboos of the society, especially when women came out to see the new wonder. It said, "*Wherever a steam carriage goes through a hamlet, young girls, old ladies, and men were busy watching the carriage with unremitting eyes from every home and every door. They had continued to focus on the automobile. Every time a car drove by during the day, they appeared this way, yet they were still unsatisfied. It was inconceivable what the women used to witness two times every day*".⁹

Hence from August 1854, the print media regularly covered news on railways. The newspapers reported that increased demand for train travel raised the company's profit. It was reported that the Company made a profit of 38,000 rupees on the fare in just five days.¹⁰ The revenue from passenger traffic also proved to be really profitable as can be discerned from a report which gave out data that from September 22 to September 27 railways declared a profit of Rs. 107,95,133.¹¹ The news reports naturally suggested increasing the number of trains since the profits had increased.¹² For instance, the East Indian Railway (EIR) was requested to extend the line due to increased demands.¹³ *Sangbad Prabhakar* reported that from the intention expressed by the Court of Directors regarding the railway road, it was clear that the lines would be extended to Lahore and connected with it by the Bombay State Railway, and a section would enter Sindh, Gwalior capital. In this way, the general populace benefit from the rail road's extension to all of India.¹⁴ The newspapers from time to time published the news related to the extension of various lines viz, from Howrah to Raniganj, Sealdah to Kushtia via Pooradah, Siladah to Krishnanagar. It published news about the development of the Rajmahal line¹⁵; and the building of an iron bridge over the Shon River,¹⁶ the extension of a railway up to Ranigunj; and its timetable, the introduction of *pheri*

⁸ *Bengal Harkaru*, 30th August 1854

⁹ *Somprakash*, 30th June, 1863

¹⁰ 'Samacharopahar', *Sambad Bhashkar*, 24th August, 1854

¹¹ 'Classification of Passengers', Traffic', *Bengal Harkaru*, 30th October, 1856

¹² 'Samacharopahar', *Sambad Bhashkar*, 22nd August, 1854

¹³ 'Samacharopahar', *Sambad Bhashkar*, 24th August, 1854

¹⁴ 'Railwayer Katha', *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 31st August, 1854

¹⁵ 'Rajmahal Anchale Railroad', *Sangbaad Prabhakar*, Shraban 15, 1263 B.S. (c.1856)

¹⁶ 'Louha Setu, Bibidha', *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 24th Poush, 1263 B. S. (c. 1856)

or steamers, for rail workers and soldiers; ¹⁷ the connecting line with Tripura, and the Assam-Bengal Railway.¹⁸ Two years following the establishment of railways, The *Sangbad Prabhakar*, *Bengal Harkaru*, and *Sadharani*, etc. published a plethora of news items updating railway endeavours.

2. Print Media of Bengal and Reporting of Accidents, Incidences and its prevention

From the very beginning, newspapers also reported on any accidents that took place. For instance, *Sambad Bhaskar* reported an accident as early as October 1854, where several compartments from one of the trains had been separated leaving the remaining compartments cracked and brittle. The accident had led to injuries, as some of the passengers jumped from the compartments. Fortunately, no one died, but the incident discouraged people from travelling by train. *Sambad Bhaskar* appealed to the people to not be afraid by this lone incident. In the report it provided the example of the railway accident that took place in France which killed many people, and yet, it did not deter the French people from using railways as their primary transport.-It is difficult to gauge whether Bengalis started using the railways again because of the new report but soon more and more people were travelling by train.¹⁹ This did not mean that the print media stopped reporting the accidents. They continuously wrote about every event such as reporting of how a number of people and animals were becoming victims of railway drivers and personnel, and there was no proof of punishment to justify those victims.²⁰ *The Education Gazette* published a report on a rail accident involving the Howrah-Amta collision.²¹

Due to constant media coverage and the resultant loss of revenues, the Indian Government was forced to undertake measures to prevent accidents and incidents. It passed an order to obtain precise information from the district magistrate upon knowing about passenger abuse by railway employees and damages and injuries. Magistrates of the regions that the railway crossed were told to provide special updated reports of the atrocities and accidents. Newspapers also noted that

¹⁷ 'Rail Nimittarthe Feri Steamer', *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 31st Jaistha, 1264 B.S. (c.1857)

¹⁸ 'Tripura Theke Agartala nutan Rail Line', *The Education Gazette*, 15th September, 1922

¹⁹ Rail Durghatana, *Sambad Bhaskar*, 21st October, 1854

²⁰ 'Bibidha', *Sangbad Prabhakar* 30th Bhadra, 1263 (C. 1856)

²¹ 'Howrah-Amta Rail-Sangharsha', *The education Gazette*, 29th Jaistha, 1329(1922)

instructions were issued for the protection of the public from rail accidents and to train workers to be more careful.²²

Besides reporting on the instructions passed by the government from time to time, the newspapers also brought to the attention of people, the government and the rail companies of the new inventions or the techniques followed in the world, which could help to prevent train accidents. For instance, *Prabhashi*, one of the leading Bengali newspapers reported of a new machine that was invented by a scientist in Ohio, USA. It said, “*This machine was like a big metal strip, which used to be kept against the road at the junction of the road and rail line. Long circular rules were fixed to the metal strip. When there was no train, the rules were taken in front to allow road vehicles to pass. However, when the train started to approach them using a machine, the circular rules began rotating, and at that time, if any motor vehicle arrived, it could not proceed further. If this machine were used everywhere, then unreasonable accidents could be avoided.*”²³

Besides this, the print media of Bengal also took special interest in reporting the complaints, allegations, and challenges that people whether rail employees or passengers had to face. Complaints reported were mainly from passengers to railway companies. The idea was to draw the attention of the government so that a plausible solution could be reached out. Occasionally, the reports were directed to inform the passengers regarding possible hazardous conditions. There were many issues that the passengers faced before travelling such as being scammed by the ticket vendor. *Sangbad Prabhakar*, for instance, reported that many passengers were unable to buy tickets due to rush and crowding. Simultaneously, the ticket dealers were scamming those who were able to obtain tickets by giving them one-way tickets for the fare of return ticket. Whenever someone tried to request a refund or file a complaint, the ticket vendors reprimanded and ridiculed them. The report was an attempt to be the voice of the people.²⁴ Newspapers of Bengal also reported that the trains would often not stop at the designated railway station despite people buying tickets for the same. For instance, the *Sadharani* newspaper reported that “one monday evening, so many passengers from Konnagar, who were travelling on the up train from Howrah towards

²² ‘Railway Sangbad’, *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 31st Shraban, 1263(C 1856)

²³ ‘Motor O Railer Sangharsha Nibaran’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Ashwin, 1334 (c.1927)

²⁴ ‘Railway katha, Bibidha’, *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 15th Ashad, 1262 B.S. (c.1854), pp.156-158

Pandua, could not get down at Konnagar station as it stopped directly at Serampore station, which was far away from Konnagar. The passengers lodged complaints with the station master, who attempted to telegram the station master of Howrah, but unfortunately, no action was taken. Consequently, the passengers were compelled to return by boat, enduring numerous hazardous conditions.”²⁵

When railway lines were built people had hoped that they could now travel in relative comfort at a faster pace. But the reality was far from this. Due to irregularity, lack of discipline, mismanagement of railways, torture of the passengers made them hopeless and apathetic about travel by train. Additionally there was always this fear of racial discrimination and exploitation at the hands of British officials. As reported in *Sadharani*, “people were unable to travel by train without facing the ordeal of being kicked and tortured by British railway officers.”²⁶ It further reported that “the sufferings of the people could be alleviated only with competent governance. It was impossible to tally the number of events and accidents that have occurred since railway construction began. The money of the passengers was often assimilated by the ticket checkers. Since passengers could not protest to anybody, they eventually used to cry and blame Jagannathji for the forced money extortion.”²⁷ A very small but significant issue raised by *Sadharani* was the lack of facilities at the railway stations for onward journeys. It said, “Even though, during the evening, they couldn't locate a horse or bullock cart on their way back home, travellers were prohibited from staying at the station or spending any time there. Even the railway officials refused to assist the helpless individuals.”²⁸ This on many occasions had led to an aggressive response from the passengers. A letter addressing railway clerks was published in the *Sadharani* in which the sender expressed the objection to the behaviour of railway clerks and questioned their morality. The letter in this context shows the misdeeds and qualities of people from all social strata; the corruption and virtues of railway employees and the average person have been emphasised.²⁹

²⁵ Railway-Abhijog, *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 30th Bhadra, 1263 B.S. (c.1856)

²⁶ Railway, *Sadharani*, 4th Shraban, 1282 (c.1875)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ ‘Railway’ *Sadharani*, 4th Shravan 1282, (c.1875)

²⁹ ‘Railway’, *Sadharani*, 6th Poush, 1281 B.S. (c.1874)

As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, passengers were regularly discriminated against on the basis of their colour. This also was reflected in print media. According to the *Sadharani* newspaper, the journey from Howrah was difficult as there were several challenges that the passengers faced. For instance, “the “*express*” amenities were not up to par, and there was a pressing need for improved carriage accommodations. There were no amenities for Indian passengers, and there was nowhere a suitable place along the entire route where a respectable native traveller could have a morsel of food. A few trains stopped for a long time at stations with refreshment rooms for Europeans. The shadow of a Hindu hotel was maintained at several stations, but it is simply a shadow. There were no buildings within the railway premises where travellers may rest, and there were few that were in terrible shape and cost too much to use.”³⁰ (Translation Mine). The reporter aimed at reaching the right people so that better arrangements could be made. Another issue that was reported was in connection with the problems that the passengers had to face due to trains being delayed. The passengers had to wait for hours on the railway platform without any food or a place to rest. The problems surmounted more for the intermediate and third class passengers who had to wait on the open Veranda outdoors, which was supplied with a small and narrow bench. The railway authorities were advised in one of the reports to take note of the matter and resolve it. The report compared the passengers to animals,³¹ as on occasions, the railway authority fined and imprisoned the passengers without any valid reasons. The newspaper *Sangbad Prabhakar* blamed the British East India Company, as they were the ones that had empowered the railways by providing police force to the railway management.³²

Alongside this, there are many allegations and complaints that have been found in various newspapers, which prove the mismanagement of the railway administration and companies. Due to accidents, the delay of the trains was frequently reported in *The Englishman* newspaper.³³ For instance, in the letter titled, “Great inconvenience” written by Moonindra Chandra Ghosh

³⁰ ‘The Train That Leaves Howrah’, *Hindoo Patriot*, 17th November, 1890, p.533-34; *Hindoo Patriot*, a weekly published (Daily from 1892) English newspaper, owned by Madhusudan Ray, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Kali Prasanna Singha and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, have been collected in many volumes later as a rare respondent and protesting news paper of colonial Bengal.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 6th Bhadra, 1263 (C. 1856)

³³ ‘Accident on the EIR’, *The Englishman*, 27th September, 1892

requesting some extra provisions for the first and the second class carriages during the weekend and before and after the holidays. This type of complaint was lodged many times. However, the railway authorities did not respond.³⁴

2.1 Echoes of the distress of the Third Class Passengers

The issues in travelling via railways became more pronounced for the third-class passengers. When the first train travelled on August 25, 1854, from Howrah to Hooghly, it consisted of three first-class coaches, two second-class coaches, three third-class open trucks, and a brake van for guards.³⁵ It appeared that from the beginning, the company authorities did not accommodate 'native' Indians as passengers, hence the roofless rooms were allotted for them. There was a wooden board without any sitting planks within. The toilet bowl was absent. Candles were not brought like British travellers for light. They were supplied with oil lights. If there were no accommodations available, luggage rooms or open tramcar rooms were occasionally offered to third-class passengers. Like cattle, passengers were herded inside. One room could accommodate 70 people. There were 120 people in the third-class room on the second level, with 70 on the first floor and 50 on the second. Whereas, ten people could fit in a really big, proof-sized room.³⁶ Despite being the ones paying the least attention, ironically, it was the third class passengers that fetched more revenues for the railway companies.

The newspapers of Bengal were aware of this and reported the same. The report of *Sangbad Prabhakar* dated 5th Aswin, 1263 B.S. (c. 1856) showed that due to a less number of first-class passengers, the railway company was profiting more from third-class passengers as they were travelling in larger numbers. These by and large were not really poor people or people with no means to travel in the first class. They just preferred to travel in the third class to save money due to shorter travel length. Despite having more passengers travelling in the third class, the railway management refused to improve the conditions of the compartments. The newspapers regularly covered news of complaints and grievances against the railways. *Sangbad Prabhakar* reported that

³⁴ 'Railway Travelling' *The Englishman*, 18th October, 1893

³⁵Mukhopadhyay, H. (1911). 'Puratan Prasanga', *Archchana*, Baisakh, Manasi, Falgun, 5th year, 1st edition, 1911, p. 436

³⁶ Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Bharatiya Somaj Chitre Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil Publication, p.171

the mistreatment of railway workers had continued and if anything it had worsened.³⁷ Macdonald Stephenson, the company's chief executive, did nothing to change that. According to one report, third-class passengers had to endure terrible suffering. It said, "*Passengers would be pushed and repeatedly flogged while purchasing a third-class ticket for the Howrah railway station. If he had arrived at the ticket counter and requested a ticket for three annas after acknowledging all of these difficulties, the ticket seller would have requested silver coins instead. But where did he get the silver coin at that time? So he gave money to buy, but when he asked for the remaining money back, he did not get it. Only clever and physically strong people would get that money. Even buying a ticket in that way could not have saved the person's suffering. When he came to the boarding place, the guards at that time would have pushed him and thrown him away. After enduring all these pains when he fetched the car, there was no escape. The British people and guards kept pushing for more people to get into the car. However, if a person with a ticket had remained on board, he would have been taken in the animal carriage.*"³⁸ The newspaper also said, "However, the accounts released by the railway company indicate that third-class compartments generated more money than first and second-class cars. Therefore, it was wrong to torture, smite, and tear off the clothes of those from whom the company earned more money."³⁹

It was not only the British but Bengali or Indian railways officials who were exploiting Indians. They targeted the illiterate, or those who did not know how to read English by not giving them a ticket for the station that they had asked for.⁴⁰ *Sangbad Prabhakar* reported that if the railway superintendent had addressed all of these anomalies and stopped the abuse of third-class passengers, the number of travellers would have further increased. The reports appeared to be hoping to improve the conditions of the third class passengers by giving incentives to make more profits. The correspondent added if a council of investigations was created, they could gather testimony from hundreds of passengers as evidence.⁴¹ The exploitation at times led to tragic results. The press reported the death of passengers on the railway platform due to lack of facilities in non-

³⁷ 'Railway Katha', *Sangbad Prabhakar*, Daily Newspaper, 30th Aswin, 1262 B.S. (15th Oct, 1855)

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ 'Railway Katha', *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 15th Ashad, 1262 B.S.(c.1855) in *Samayik Patre Banglar Samaj Chitra*, Vol. 2. Edited by Binay Ghosh, Kolkata: Papyrus Publication, 1978, pp. 156-158

⁴¹ Ibid.

favourable weather conditions. Despite their continued protests, instead of improving the facilities for the third class passengers, two-story third-class compartments were inaugurated in 1862. Although the efforts of the newspapers did yield results and after much struggle the East India Railway Company arranged for benches and some other minor changes but there was no immediate change in the status of third-class passengers.⁴² In fact, it is believed that the maxim 'third class' has been used to denote someone with no manners or crude and crass people. Nonetheless both the print media and the people kept on making attempts to improve the conditions of the third class compartments. For instance, in 1866, around 3,000 third-class passengers sent a signed petition to the Viceroy. The changes were seen but too little and too late. After much exchange of communication, 37 years later, in 1891, toilets were installed in the third-compartment with only a 5-inch leak on the floor! A British female passenger observed and wrote "Perhaps the engineer would have drilled holes according to the classification of railway fares."⁴³

As has been mentioned before, the number of passengers travelling in the third class compartments were larger in number. In order to increase their revenues and profits, the railway companies continued to increase the fare. To encourage travel in the first and the second class compartments, in 1924, railways reduced the fare for first and second class., but the fare for third class was kept as it was. The struggle between the third class compartment passengers and the railway administration continued and the complaints of the passengers found voices in the newspapers.⁴⁴ For instance, *Prabashi* also published complaints against railway companies. It urged other newspapers to keep up the pressure on this issue. In the same volume, *Prabhashi* released a complaint report about rising product prices as well as room rents while scheduling product orders for booking in the goods train.⁴⁵

The third class passengers were at times made to travel in even a worse manner by being forced to board the freight cars which was illegal.⁴⁶ *Prabashi* also quoted from the *The Manchester Guardian*, an influential daily newspaper in England, which had urged the government to improve

⁴² 'Tritiya Shrenir Rail-Jatri', *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Jaishtha, 1874, pp.313-14

⁴³ Ghosh, S. (1998). 'East Indian Railway o Deshiya jatrikul' , *Jogajog*, Kolikata: Kolikata pustakalay, p. 16

⁴⁴ 'Railer Tritiya Shrenir Jatri', *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1331 B.S. (c. 1924), pp.830-32

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the condition of the third class compartments. It wrote that “third-class sleeping accommodation is a long overdue railway reform. It is public convenience that ought to be supplied on the public ground; the test ought not to be whether it can be done without involving the railway companies in the loss.”⁴⁷ It further said that since India was a much bigger country than Great Britain; one had to travel much farther by rail than England. That is why they thought it was necessary to arrange sleeping places in the third-class carriages, especially for overnight and long-distance trains. The Railway Board's reports of 1923 and 1924 stated that the GIP Railway introduced a new type of third-class sleeper carriage. It was suggested that this should be introduced on all Indian railways.⁴⁸

The third class railway passengers were also persecuted. The newspaper *Prabashi* further reported quoting the report of the Accounts General of Railways of 1925-26. “*At stations where train tickets were not checked normally, suddenly one day the tickets were checked, and it was found that there were 15 first class, 11 second class, 30 intermediate class and 160 third class passengers travelling without tickets. Among them, 27 intermediate and third classes were prosecuted under the Railway Act. But no prosecution was instituted against those of the first and second classes who were able to pay higher rents, the reason for which is not stated in the report.*”⁴⁹ (Translation Mine) The plight of the third class passengers also was reflected when Mahatma Gandhi travelled in the train from Calcutta to Haridwar, where he faced bitter experiences. He noted that the compartments had no lights and no roofs, and the carriages were full of goods and cattle. Mid-day piercing sun and the scorching iron fire beneath made them hot. He complained to the railway authority by declaring: “*I have fairly covered the majority of railway systems during the period. Now I have entered into correspondence with the management of the different railways about the defects that have come to my attention. But I think that the time has come when I should invite the press and the public to join in a crusade against a grievance which has too long remained unredressed, though much of it is capable of redress without great difficulty.*”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ ‘Railer Tritiya Shrenir Jatri’, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1331 B.S. (c. 1924), pp. 830-32

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ ‘Tritiya Shrenir Jatrider Prati Daya’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Ashwin, 1334 B.S. (1927), pp. 455-56

⁵⁰ Saxena, K.B. (Ed.). (2018). *In Love With Common Man*, in Swaraj and the Reluctant State. New Delhi: Akbar Books, p. 20

As has been mentioned before, the railway authority remained-indifferent towards the plight of the third class passengers, which reflected in one of the reports of the railway authority that "...the native does not require a cubic but superficial space whereon to dispose of his bundle, his brass, his pots, and other property."⁵¹ The government did take a few measures but they were not enough to address the issues mentioned above.

2.2. Conundrum of Women's Train Journeys

As can be seen from the above section, rail travel had brought within its fold many problems of travelling. Despite its boon of a faster mode of travel, passengers faced insurmountable problems. Out of those passengers who travelled, female passengers faced more problems than their male counterparts. Women had always travelled in seclusion accompanied or chaperoned by males. Even with the introduction of railways, women were allowed to travel in the train but only with a proper chaperone, again, mostly males. Train travel had proven to be very difficult for women for they had to endure several physical, emotional, and social tribulations. Along with that, there was no separate arrangement within the compartment or on the platforms for women. Moreover, the mindset of many European train personnel made their journey sometimes life-taking.

Many instances and perils experienced by female travellers were covered by newspapers and publications. For instance, *Bharati O Balak* reported a complaint of sexual abuse against a European guard in August 1888. Three Hindu women were travelling on Goalanda Up Train No. 11 on August 30, 1886. A European guard, Snilar, moved to the women's compartment when the train arrived at Chuadanga. He saw that the women were unaccompanied by a male chaperone. Taking advantage of the situation, he changed his compartment so that he could be next to that of the women. He attempted to lift the compartment's curtains or blinds, and made sexual gestures. Women were forced to look away. He was not satisfied with that and forced himself into their compartment and attacked Rohini, a 25-year-old widow. He attempted to rape her. To save her chastity, Rohini leapt out of the window as soon as the train reached Pooradah station. People were afraid of the Englishman but a local guard was brave enough to notify the station master of the incident. Rohini had fainted and was hurt. Local people approached and rescued her. A complaint

⁵¹ K. R. Vaidyanathan, Sep, 1990, *Raj to Rajdhani: Rail Travel in India*, Indian Railways, p. 16. E-version

was filed against European officer Snilar by the police of the railway department after local journalists raised agitation on the subject. Initially, the lawsuit was filed in Kushtia, but the officer Snilar protested because a local judge was appointed for the case. Thus, the lawsuit was eventually shifted to Krishnanagar. The newspaper reported that the case was unfair as there were only two attorneys to speak for the police but the European guard had European lawyers and judges to support him.⁵² No one knew what happened as no published report has been found so far. The incident clearly shows that female passengers were not safe while travelling in the train. Another newspaper *Prabashi* (1922, Kartik-Chaitra) reported of an allegation regarding conduct against female passengers, in which it recommended that second and third-class cabins for Indian women be appropriately set up. They should have ample space on every train, and special female workers should be hired to take care of their comfort and convenience. There were separate chambers for European ladies into which Indian women were not permitted, but occasionally they entered the compartment of Indian women, leaving them feeling unwelcome and unwanted. Due to space and vehicle limitations, Indian women were compelled to travel alongside other male passengers, which was uncomfortable and perhaps harmful for their health. Even they ran inside the women's locker rooms to escape from an unfamiliar and shameful environment.⁵³

Another report was published by the *Rangpur Darpan* newspaper, which was republished in *Prabashi* later. The report demonstrated the sufferings of women in third-class railway compartments. After many years of complaining, the Government of India decided to resolve the issue by assigning special ladies compartments. The only difference between the male and female compartments was that the ladies compartment was written (marked) as ladies. However, it was not a plausible solution as it was difficult for them to read the markers saying 'For Ladies', as many of them were illiterate. The threat was further heightened when men entered ladies railway compartments causing panic, especially at night. Newspapers such as *Asubidha* even unsuccessfully appealed to the railway companies and the government to colour code the

⁵² 'Ekti Asohay Striloker Prati Bhishon Pashobik Otyachar', *Bharati*, Bha O Ba Aswin, 1293 B. S. (c. 1886). pp. 370-71

*Note: The editor of this monthly journal was Swarnakumari Devi, niece of Rabindranath Tagor who published this news as a protest on behalf of female passengers.

⁵³ 'Stilokdiger Ashubidha' *Prabashi*, Kartick-Chaitra, 1922

compartment so that women and men's railway compartments would visually appear to be separate.⁵⁴

Another problem that the people of Bengal faced was with regards to allowing prostitutes to travel in the same compartment with other women. This was not acceptable to the '*bhadralok*' (civilised members of the society). Lot of complaints were filed against allowing prostitute female passengers to travel. Most of the newspapers of Bengal at the time supported the cause of not allowing prostitutes to travel freely in the railways. A newspaper *Somprakash* proposed that prostitutes should not be allowed in the female compartments.⁵⁵ Over the question that the train travel was for those who could pay the fares, *Prabashi* argued that "if the fare is the only condition to travel by train, then why would it be necessary to arrange separate compartments for ladies? It was also argued that if a special type of train is required for the special condition of society, for example, a special saloon compartment for kings and queens and a separate compartment for Europeans, then the proposal to expel prostitutes is not unreasonable."⁵⁶ Another newspaper, *Sulabh Samachar* also suggested to the Eastern Bengal Railway that prostitutes should not be permitted to travel with other female passengers who were more affluent or women of distinction. They said that the passengers, the aristocratic females, would be mortified if they were in the presence of a prostitute. The station masters were also requested that even if the ladies' compartment was empty, prostitutes should not be allowed to take the train, since this would be encouraging the harlots and demeaning to respectable women.⁵⁷ The report used the word 'we' several times which demonstrates the plurality of the protesting, protest from the society. However, Indian reformers, as per the report, opposed this proposal, deeming it incongruous and laughable. They asked how it would be known who is a prostitute and who is a gentlewoman.⁵⁸

Along with several reports and accounts, several government documents also contain statements regarding other problems that women faced. For instance, the platform's waiting area for the women was not in good condition at places so the female passengers were compelled to wait

⁵⁴ 'Stri Jatrir Asubidha', *Prabashi*, Kartik, 1329 B. S.(c.1922)

⁵⁵ 'Rail O Beshya', *Somprakash*, 26th Jan, 1863

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ 'Raile Sadharan Nari O Beshya', *Sulabh Samachar*, 4th Baisakh, 1320 B.S. (c.1913)

⁵⁸ Ibid.

outdoors. Several times, female travellers would have to pass by stalls that would have been occupied by male passengers. It was difficult for them to go through the crowd to the female waiting area. Concerns about female travellers' privacy also were raised and reported in the newspapers. 'Though the condition was brought to the notice of the railway authority by the local people, the authorities have so far omitted to take any action in the matter'.⁵⁹

Thereafter, the following few measures were taken to ensure the security of women passengers by the railways: i) Railways continued to pay careful attention to the safety of female passengers; ii) installation of interior safety door catch systems; iii) installation of a wire gauge window shutter in addition to extra safety catches; iv) fitting of Venetian frames on windows and doors with safety catch arrangements; v) bar installation on the remaining windows in the women's section; vi) provision of two more alarm numbers that are conveniently accessible from the lower seats on both sides of the compartment; vii) positioning of third class ladies' compartments as close as possible to the Guard's van.⁶⁰ *Hindoo Patriot* applauded the Indian government for taking the necessary measures to allow local women from the upper classes to travel in great comfort.⁶¹ *Rangpur DikPrakash* also commended the Eastern Bengal Railway Company for setting up separate trains with restrooms and drinking water for female passengers.⁶²

2.3. British Apathy Towards Railway Employees and Their Responses

Introduction of railways with the British capital led to generation of great profits which was possible because of many reasons, especially because of the availability of abundant cheap labour. Since, the government (colonial) was working along with the capitalists, therefore the labour laws that were there were not effective in preventing exploitation of the railway workers. The railway workers or working class mostly was composed of peasants, tribals, and landless labourers who most of the time in the colonial period had remained outside the periphery of any kind of protection by government laws. Hence, across the Indian subcontinent, these marginalised social groups

⁵⁹ Official Report, Bengal Legislative Council Debates, Vol. 1,-No. 1, Friday 16th february,1940, Alipore, Bengal: Bengal Government Press, p.11

⁶⁰ Report by the Railway Board on Indian Railways for 1941-42, Volume 1. Delhi: Manager of Publication, p.35

⁶¹ 'Travel Arrangement for aristocrat women by Railway', *Hindoo Patriot*, 14th June, 1869

⁶² 'Strilokder Prithak Train Jattrar Byabastha', *Rangpur Dikpraksh*, 16th December, 1869

engaged in protests against their masters. Majority of the railway workers were employed on contract basis and therefore the government pay revisions were not applicable to them. Additionally, there was an abundance of cheap labour, therefore, if they did not abide by the orders or did not follow instructions, they were liable to be relieved of their duties without any severance package. This led to their further exploitation.⁶³ Social and racial distinctions played an important role in the construction and management of railways. Priority was given to Europeans and Anglo-Indians in higher positions. From the very beginning, workers were discriminated against by the railway company on the basis of race. As a result, there was no opportunity for a united movement against the exploitation.⁶⁴ In addition to that discrimination in wages on the basis of race was another reason behind their agitations. Most of the employees in higher grades were European and were given higher salaries than Indians.⁶⁵

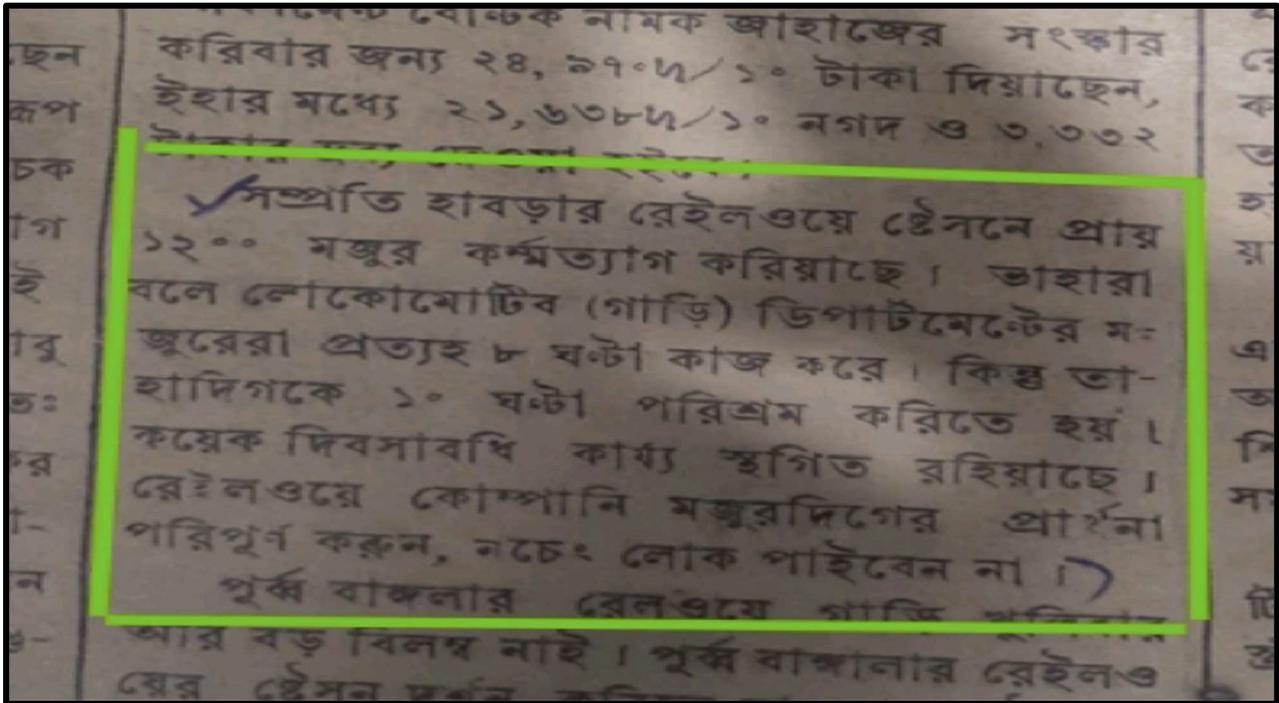
This and many other factors led to a protest amongst the workers and in May 1862 almost 1200 workers went on a strike. They demanded limited working hours (eight hours) and a better pay package. The vernacular press covered the strike in their daily newspapers, despite the suppressive Press Act No. 14 of 1857. Around 1200 workers of Howrah Railway Station left their work. According to the rules of the locomotive department of the Howrah section, the workers were supposed to work for 8 hours but in practice, they were made to work for 10 hours and due to that, the work was suspended for a few days.’ Not only that, The *Somprakash*, a Bengali daily newspaper protested, "Fulfil the demand of railway workers; otherwise, you won't get people" to continue your work further.⁶⁶ Along with *Somprakash*, *Prabashi*, *Amrita Bazar*, *Sndhya*, *Shramajibi*, *Hitabadi*, *Sanjivani*, *Kulikahini*, *The Statesman*, *Modern review* continuously published many news stories regarding labour agitations across India. Though the demand was not met at that time the moral support of the newspapers for the demands of workers gave the spirit and pace to the labour movement further.

⁶³ Laxman D. S. (2007). British Imperial Railways in Nineteenth Century South Asia. [Vol. 43, No. 47 \(Nov. 22 - 28, 2008\)](#), pp. 69-77

⁶⁴ Kerr, I. J. (1985). Working Class Protest in 19th Century India: Example of Railway Workers. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 20(4), Pp. 34-40.

⁶⁵ Ghosh, G. (1969). *Bharate Shramik Andolonar Itihas*. Calcutta: Luck Itihash Prokashan, p59

⁶⁶ *Somprakash*, 5th May, 1862



Source: *Sompraksh*, 7th May, 1862

Railway workers were the first to organise and demand a reduction in working hours in India. The creation of such a phenomenon had some effect on the political awakening of the working class long before the world phenomenon that did not then manifest itself outside India. From this, it can be assumed that the political consciousness of the Indian workers was revealed. The strike of 1862 was followed by strikes involving clerks of the East India Railway Audit Department.⁶⁷ This time the demand was not to reduce the working hours but to protest against humiliation by the European head clerks and officials. Humiliation and negligence towards the clerks, workers, and railway passengers was the daily routine at that time, which has been reflected regularly through Bengali and English newspapers. When the chief of the Audit Department insulted the Bengali clerks, they protested by refusing to go to work. This time, the protest was not limited to the strike itself; the agitation was intensified with regular insistence in front of the office until the incident was resolved. A protest and strike by the employees led to a final settlement of the incident, with the officials apologising to the workers. This was a glorious victory for the Howrah railway workers.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Moshel, B. (1985). *Bharate Dharmoghoter Itihas 1827-1885*. Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, P. 117

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Many newspapers supported the strike and urged the government to give the workers their rights, to which the government agreed - "Adequate wages benefit both the owners of the capital and the labourers as well." ⁶⁹

The above clearly indicates that the newspapers consistently supported the railway workers' agitations carried out to improve pathetic working conditions, low wages, humiliation, extortions, etc. The newspapers were at the forefront, supporting the workers' demands and agitations, which made the people aware of the condition and boosted the morale of the workers. According to an article published in *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, titled, '*Rail Karmocharider Dharmoghot*', initially a regional newspaper had remained aloof and did not report regarding the agitations of the working class. However, soon the newspapers took on the responsibility of creating public awareness regarding the welfare and extortions as well as those done by the British government. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* at that time played a crucial role against all kinds of extortions. After seeing the condition of working places, it raised questions- "how did the Indian people manage their homes and families? How did our ancestors raise their families? Nowadays, hundreds and thousands of young people are working hard for money by sacrificing their bodies, minds, freedom, and self-esteem."⁷⁰ The newspaper at the same wrote of the usefulness of providing employment to thousands of people. At the same time, *Amritbazar Patrika*, also reported of other such protests. For instance, there was wide coverage of a protest staged by overworked employees of Jamalpur. The employees were asked to work for twenty four hours without any promise of overtime. Some young workers refused to work even when officers threatened to reduce their salary by five rupees. Instead they submitted their resignation letters, which were not accepted, and they were fired from their jobs. The other workers were shocked by this behaviour and reacted collectively by conveying their grievances to the higher authorities.⁷¹ It is not known as to what was the end result, but the newspaper extolled the protest of the employees of the office of railway auditor of Jamalpur. Similarly *Amritbazar Patrikar* also reported of another strike. On 6th May, 1899, Indian workers of the 'Signal Association' went on strike, demanding equality of pay between Anglo-

⁶⁹ 'Sramikder Adhikar', *Somprokash*, 9th June, 1862

⁷⁰ 'Railway Karmocharider Proti Obichar', *Amritabazar Patrika*, 8th July, 1869.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Indian/European employees, who were engaged in the same work and shorter working hours.⁷² Another strike that was reported took place on July 1, 1901, which began at the Liluah Railway Factory in Howrah against changes in the timing of work hours. Earlier working hours were 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 12 p.m. to 3.30 p.m. after 1 hour of rest. According to the new schedule, working hours are fixed from 8 am to 12 pm and from 1 pm to 4-30 minutes, with an hour of rest in between. Working hours had been increased for Indian workers instead of decreased, which was fatal for those workers who, after their railway jobs, were engaged in other part-time work as they were paid low wages by railway companies.⁷³

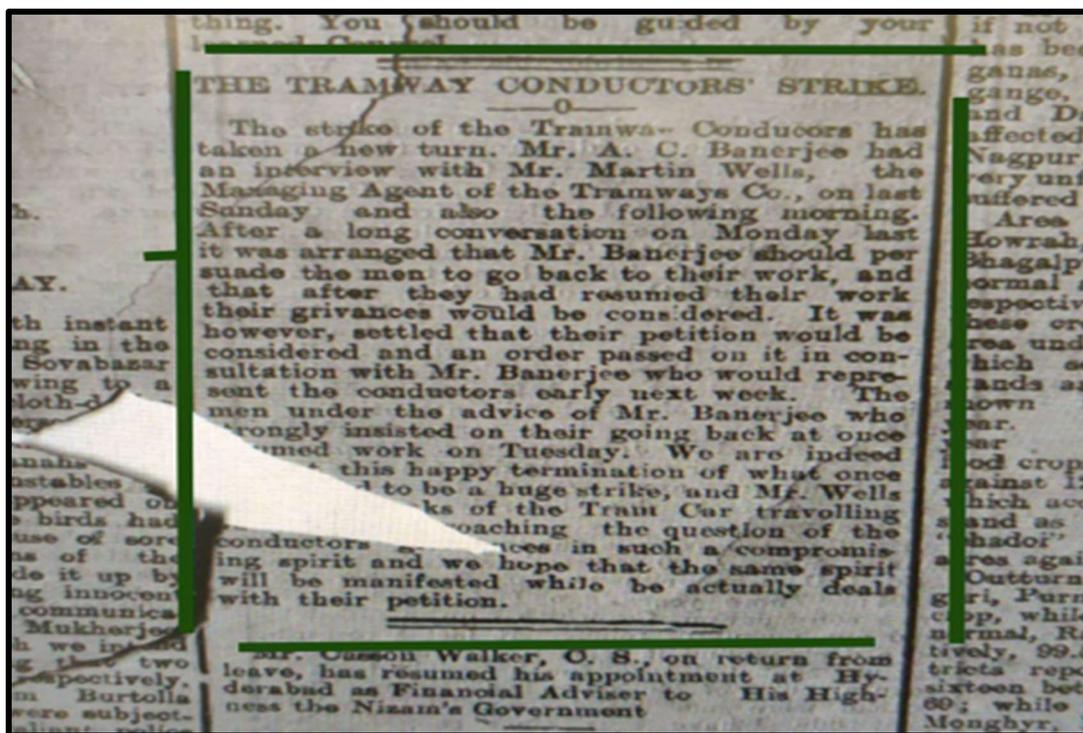
The twentieth century brought to the fore a collective nationalist idea vis-a-vis colonial control. Nationalism, whether in its moderate form or extremist form, infused strength into the protests against the government. The Swadeshi movement (1905-1911) witnessed a series of strikes launched by railway workers as reported in the newspapers of the time. The first strike was started by the 247 clerks of the Burn Company in Howrah in September 1905 in protest against new work regulations. Next month, another notable strike was started by the tram conductors in Calcutta. Oppressive service conditions, harassment in working places, low wages, and hard work for a long time led them to walk out of their duties in five sections on 6th October, 1905.⁷⁴ After much suffering they gave a petition to the managing committee demanding more wages. Additionally, they demanded better uniforms, and shorter working hours; and permission to rest when there were no passengers etc.⁷⁵ They got support from 'Samiti' leaders such as Apurba Kumar Ghosh, Ashwini Commer Banerji, and others. The strike of the tramway conductors had intensified when A.C. Banerjee met with the management of the Tramways Co., for two days on 8th October, 1905 and 9th October, 1905.

⁷² 'Rail Karmocharider Dharmoghot', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8th July, 1869

⁷³ Chowdhury, P. (2012). *Samaj Chitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata, gangchill pub, p.289

⁷⁴ Sarkar, S. (1973). *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, pp.215-227

⁷⁵ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21st October, 1905



Source: *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15th October, 1905

After a long conversation it was decided that Banerjee would persuade the men to return to their work. Their grievances would be considered only after that. Banerji had sensed that the workers were not going to be able to hold on the strike for too long. Capitulation was the only option but at the same he had hoped to obtain a better deal in the negotiations. However the matter was dismissed after a superficial consideration. The nine tram drivers were punished severely and some even faced dismissal. The daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika* covered the matter stating, “It seemed for the first time in the history of the Bengali working-class movement, that the working class’s demands were going to be met, but later the management turned back their faces and rejected almost all the demands of the conductors, who were rigid and stuck with the existing terms and conditions, which were supposed to be accepted by the management.”⁷⁶

Similarly newspapers reported more such agitations in Bengal, especially at three railway workshops—at Liloah/Liluah, Kharagpur, and Jamalpur—which employed about 5000, 3600,

⁷⁶ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3rd November, 1905

and 8200 men, respectively.⁷⁷ The agitations were carried out for the following reasons: 1. The social and racial discrimination among the European employees, white collar employees who belonged to Bhadrak society, and the rest of the Indian workers (the proletariat of railway workshops), 2. Oppression exploitation of the working class by their superiors, 3. Skewed wage difference tilted in favour of the white officers and their Bengali supporters; 4. And last but not the least the influence of the nationalist ideology.

In July 1906, the workers and employees of East Indian Railway Company called for a strike, which continued till September 1906. The demand was for equal pay and optimal working hours at par with European and Anglo-Indian workers. Very soon the strike spread to other stations and after a meeting with the EIR workers, they decided to put a stop to the railway traffic system. A nineteen-point demand was presented to the railway administration. Unfortunately the demands were not met and the workers continued with a series of agitations. For the first time, nationalist leaders such as Aswini Kumar Banerji, Pravatkusum Roychoudhury, Apurba Kumar Ghosh and Premtosh Bose supported the railway workers.⁷⁸ Famous nationalists, both moderate and extremist, congress leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Liakat Hussain supported and gave advice to the workers.⁷⁹

From the two-month-long East Indian Railway strike of July-September 1906, there was an increasing national interest in representing and guiding labour unrest, especially of the railway employees. Nationalist leaders such as A.K. Ghosh as President, Premtosh Bose as Secretary and Liakat Husain created a union, and called it 'Railway Men's Union'. They encouraged the railway employees to join this union by travelling to the various parts of Bengal. The idea was to encourage various railway employees to unify and join with each other, even if they themselves had not gone on strike. This was also covered in the newspapers. For instance, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reproduced the report of the Special branch of police which said that,⁸⁰ "*Failing to their varied attempts to coerce the company into granting the extravagant demands set up by them on behalf of the strikers,*

⁷⁷ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3rd November, 1905. p.215

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p.73

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p.217

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* P 217

the Calcutta agitators, chiefly Premtosh Bose, A.k. Ghosh, and Liakat Hussain, had since August transferred the scene of their machination to the railway centre of Asansol, Ranigunj, Jamalpur, Sahibganj, insisting the workmen there to join the Railway Union which they have started and which is to support all railway workers who go on strike. This was not easy and secret meetings had to be held to encourage railway workers such as coolies to join other railway workers on strike. Some even suggested that the non-participative workers should be socially boycotted to force them to join."⁸¹ (Translation Mine). The journal *Swadeshi* also reported in 1906 of the "extraordinary frequency" of strikes.⁸² In 1907, more strikes took place in Bengal with successful results. For instance, a strike took place in October, 1907, against humiliating rules imposed on the clerks of the Burn Company, where the clerks were forced to give a thumb impression along with written attendance in the attendance book. After the involvement of a local organisation and students, Burn Company was forced to withdraw its rule of giving a thumb impression.⁸³ Similarly, the issues of tram drivers were resolved via strikes which were supported by national leaders and newspapers of Bengal. Newspapers of Bengal and even outside Bengal covered the strikes or matters related to railway employees on a regular basis and laid a special emphasis on how the Swadeshi movement and the national movement had fostered a sense of unity amongst the railway employees. As it was, reported in the 'London Daily News'- "On this fiery onset, railway strikes also took a new direction with new nationalism."⁸⁴

As can be discerned from above, newspapers played a very important role in supporting the railway workers to meet their demands. "In India in bondage, the press played its distinctive role as the crusading agent for the political emancipation of the country."⁸⁵ During the Swadeshi period regional newspapers also actively gave psychological support to the working class. Newspapers such as *Prabashi*, *Sadharani*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and most importantly, *Sandhya* and *Bengali*, raised their voices against the oppression and exploitation done by the British government and railway companies. Nationalist ideology inspired several publishing houses which enabled them to actively participate in propagating nationalist ideas amongst the working class. The office of

⁸¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3rd November, 1905. p.218

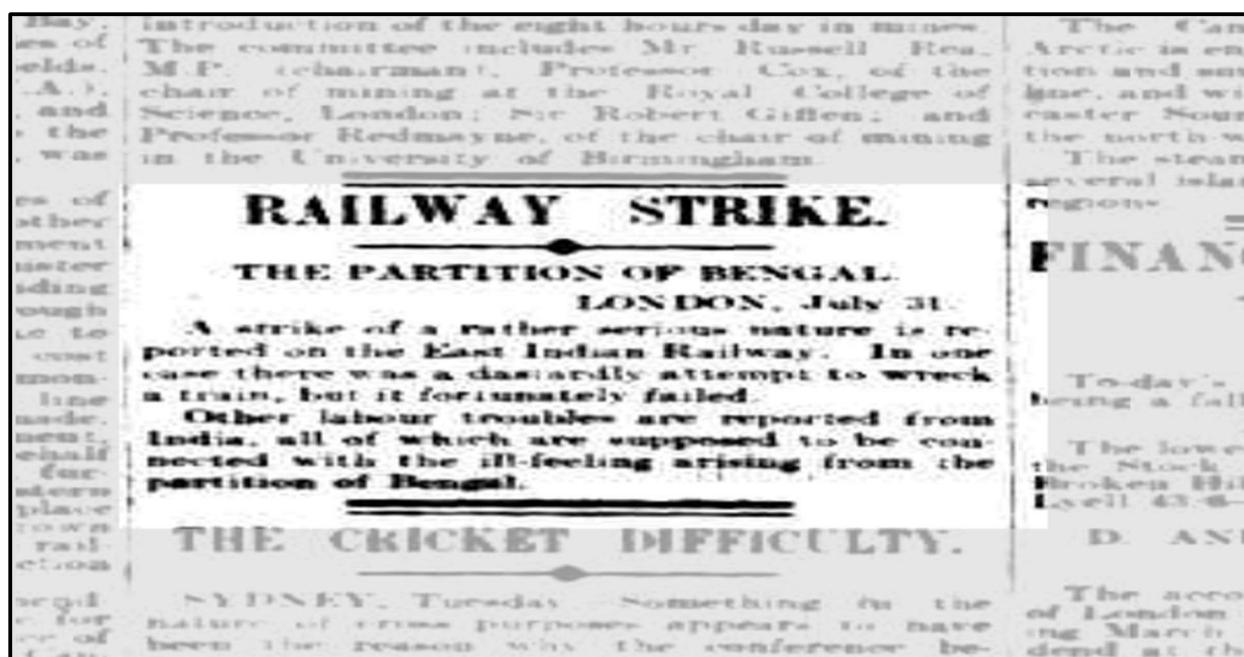
⁸² 'Dharmaghat O Swadeshi', *Swadeshi*, Shrabon, 1313 (c. 1906)

⁸³ Mukhopadhyay, J. P. (1956). *Biplabi Jibaner Smriti*. Calcutta: Academic Publishers, pp. 214-16

⁸⁴ *London Daily News*, Friday, September 29, 1905

⁸⁵ Moitra, M.(1955). *A history of Indian Journalism*. National Book Agency Pvt. Ltd., p-25

the *Sandhya* became the centre for meetings for the workers, nationalist leaders, and the editor (editor at the time was Brahmabandhav Upadhyay). On 27th July, 1906, the foundation of the Railwaymen's Union was laid down at the *Sandhya* office.⁸⁶ The motto of *Sandhya* was - "If death comes in the striving, the death will be converted to immortality."⁸⁷ *Sandhya* reported, "People are soundly thrashing a *ferringhi* whenever they come across one, and the thrashing of European soldiers are continuing... but "Listen, you will hear the mother's trumpet sounding."⁸⁸ The response of the English Press reflects a sense of fear and caution which arose due to the coverage and support extended by newspapers of Bengal to the nationalist activities, including that of the railway employees. For instance, *The Argus* wrote that "a strike of rather serious nature is reported on the East Indian Railway. In one case, there was a dastardly attempt to wreck a train, but it fortunately failed." *The Argus* had continuously reported the news regarding labour issues.⁸⁹



Source: *The Argus*, 31st July, 1905

⁸⁶ Sarkar, S. (1973). *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, P. 209

⁸⁷ Patel, H. (2008). *Khudiram Bose: Revolutionary Extraordinair*. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, p.19

⁸⁸ Patel, H. (2008). *Khudiram Bose: Revolutionary Extraordinair*. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, p.18

⁸⁹ 'Railway Strike, The Partition of Bengal', *The Argus*, 31st August, 1905

The railway strikes also continued after the end of the Swadeshi Movement. During the post-Swadeshi era, the railway employees in Bengal staged several strikes. The most notable strikes were the railway workers' strike at Kharagpur; the labour unrest at Liluah workshop in 1919; the labour movement at Kachrapara railway workshop by 5800 labourers in 1921; the railway workers' movement at Assam Bengal section in support of the labour movement of Assam tea garden in 1921; the railway workers' movement at Bengal Nagpur Railway in 1927; the railway workers' unrest at Liloah workshop in 1928 and Bengal-Nagpur working class movement in 1936 and 1948. All of these movements were the most notable because they gave the working class movement a nationalist tempo that allowed it to be organised for workers and labourers as well as for the nation.⁹⁰

These strikes were covered in the newspapers of Bengal. There were many other reasons for the strikes besides the reasons stated above. The working conditions of railway workers in India were worsening by the day. The railway owners had not allowed workers to organise. Additionally, trains run by the Indian government were infected with this deadly ailment. The Indian Railway Board, Secretaries of the Government of India, and others disregarded the appeals of the working class. There were various issues raised concerning the paucity of Indian Railway subordinates, employees, and labourers. Every year, the Indian Legislative Council drew the government's attention to their plight, but to no avail. In addition to the issues such as low wages and discriminatory practices, the employees faced other problems. The children of railway employees could study in the schools in some areas which were provided by the government but they had to wear school uniforms, which was proving to be expensive. The workers demanded pay for their uniforms. They protested against racism in education as European and Indian converted Christian students were given much more facilities than the children of Bengali railway workers. They protested not to give the responsibility to appoint Indian workers to those who were hostile to Indians. The newspaper *Prabashi* also reported that Indians were not being appointed at the designated Indian positions. The workers had placed a demand that this be corrected. The newspapers pointed towards many other reasons so that the government would approve legitimate trade unions in the railways. The paper *Prabashi* urged that the representatives of trade unions must

⁹⁰ Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bharatiya Rail. Kolkata: Gangchil*, pp.298-306

be trusted; workers should have fixed working hours, and caste discrimination in all aspects, including salaries, must be eliminated.⁹¹

The following table shows the wage disparity as published in the newspaper *Prabashi* which was based on the report written by Roy Saheb Chandrika Prasad, an assistant traffic superintendent of the Indian Railways with the same rank and qualification in comparison with other countries.⁹²

Table 2

Nation	Salary
Europeans in India	Rs. 3500-4000
Indians	Rs. 350-400
Japan	Rs. 1000
Switzerland Switzerland	Rs.1.42
Denmark	Rs. 1333-1600
Belgium	Rs. 1333-1600
Italy	Rs 1333-1600
Denmark	Rs. 333-1600

The given wage rates show disparity and incredibly unreasonable exorbitant compensation from Indian taxpayers. Whereas, the salary of the highest-ranking employees of the Indian Railways

⁹¹ 'Railway Board O Bharatiya Shramik', *Prabashi*, Kartik - Chaitra, 1334 B.S. (c.1927), pp. 29-32

⁹² 'Railway Karmocharir Betan', *Prabashi*, Kartik -Chaitra, 1330 B.S. (c.1927), pp. 568-69

was quite high, while the salary of the lowest-ranking employees was incomparable and insufficient for subsistence.

Discrimination in recruitment was also another issue that led to discontentment amongst railway workers. According to a Railway Board report, there were 7, 27, 013 railway personnel in India overall, whereas the total number of government workers in British India, excluding the army and police, was 10,08,061. However, the media routinely published the complaints of people working in other government jobs but seldom did so for railway employees.⁹³ The Bengali newspaper *Prabashi* in 1926, raised the issue of disparity and racism in recruiting Indian employees for higher posts. Thus emphasising the need to take into account the issue with more gravity.⁹⁴

Another report by *Prabashi* (1927) shows the discrimination and the strategy of the Railway Board in recruiting employees. Most of the Indian employees were recruited at the lower levels, where the percentage of employees earning salaries beyond Rs 250 was unheard of.

⁹³ Rai Saheb, C. P., 'Condition of Indian Railwaymen'. *The Modern Review* for April 1926, p. 429

⁹⁴ 'Railway Karmoharider Prati Amanojog', *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1333 B. S. (c. 1926) pp. 226

Table No. 3⁹⁵

1923-24		1924-25		
Race	Number of employees	Percentage	Number of employees	Percentage
Europeans	2818	38.06	2810	35.85
Anglo-Indian	2786	37.62	2949	37.61
Total	5608	75.68	5759	73.46
Non-Muslim	1584	21.40	1822	23.24
Muslim	216	2.92	259	3.30
Total(Indian)	1800	28.32	2081	26.54
All total	7808	100.00	7840	100.00

⁹⁵ 'Railway Board O Bharatiya Shramik', *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1334 B.S. (c. 1927)

The above table showcases that in the year 1923-24, out of 720754 employees, 2818 European employees were earning more than Rs. 250 per month, which increased to 2810 employees, in the year 1924-1925. In comparison to this, only 1800 Muslims and non-Muslims employees were earning more than Rs. 250 per month, in the year 1923-24, which increased to 2081 employees, out of 740854, in the year 1924-1925.⁹⁶

According to Reports, till 1923-24, by the Indian Railway Board the railway staff were classified as Europeans, Anglo Indians and Indians (Muslims and non-Muslims).⁹⁷ On the basis of the data of the railway board, in 1926 *Parabashi* stated that employee categories were divided into Europeans, Statutory Indians, and Other categories. And Anglo-Indians were suddenly put in ‘Other Category’, a category which included Muslims and Sikhs, to demonstrate that authentic Indians held more posts in government departments.⁹⁸ In addition to this Indians like Parsis, Sikhs, and others who were non-Muslim servants were considered real Indians of the mixed Anglo-Indian class.

3. Railways and ‘Drain of Wealth’

Print media, and literary traditions not only represented railways as transformative instruments but also explored its other faces too. Immediately after the inception of railways in Bengal, print media applauded them, but a few years later, it was realised that railways were also instrumental in administrative and economic exploitation. After a few years, economists, nationalists concluded that the railways had become an important tool for draining the wealth out of India. This was also reflected in the newspapers of Bengal of the time.

Two years after the introduction of railways (1856) in Bengal *Sangbad Prabhakar*, a Bengali daily newspaper, publicised the rage over the impact of railways. *Sangbad Prabhakar* wrote that “in the past, many writers praised the British government for the development of the electric

⁹⁶ ‘Railway Board O Bharatiya Shramik’, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1334 B.S. (c.1927), pp. 29-32 ; *Report by the Railway Board on Indian Railways for 1924-25 & 1925-26*, vol. I & II, Calcutta Government of India, Central Publications Branch, 1925, p. 62

⁹⁷ *Report by the Railway Board on Indian Railways for 1924-25 & 1925-26*, Vol. I & II. Calcutta Government of India, Central Publications Branch, 1925, p. 62

⁹⁸ ‘Railway Board o Bharatiya Shramik’, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1334, (c.1927), pp. 29-39

*telegraphs, railways, and irrigation of canals. However, it is important to note that the railways, which were funded by the public, were the most significant of these projects. And the construction of the railways aimed to generate profits only. While it cannot be denied that the government provided substantial support for the railway construction, it was primarily financed by public funds. Without reforming canals, which was more required for agriculture.”*⁹⁹ (Translation Mine)

The article expressed outrage at other publications for solely promoting the benefits of railways. The railway was the largest of the three significant communication systems, which were constructed solely for their ‘own economic benefit’. The reporter uses the term "public fund" to refer to both the railway company's plan to extort money from the public by extracting revenues from India; and the goal of the railway company to spend funds on railways to earn profit. The analysis unequivocally demonstrates that, despite the government granting the company numerous benefits, such as free land, all of the work has not been done at the government's expense. The economic exploitation intensified Many Bengali newspapers and periodicals published reports and articles showing railways causing economic exploitation in Bengal. The article published in Prabashi explained exploitation being carried out in the following manner.¹⁰⁰

1. Investment of foreign capital in building railways. The article asked, “Why was foreign capital invested instead of Indian capital? A five percent dividend, from the very beginning, was flowing into England as they invested money. It was argued that when the interest was to be paid from the Indian Treasury, if the loan was taken from Indian merchants, then the interest rate would be with the Indians. If that were not possible, then the British Indian government would have taken loans from those countries, where loans were available at low rates.
2. The newspaper raised its voice, asking why most of the materials for building rail lines and other necessary structures were brought from England instead of India? At least the British Indian Government might buy those materials from those countries where they were cheap.

⁹⁹ *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 21 Jaishtha, 1263 B. S. (c.1856)

¹⁰⁰“Rail Bistarer jonya Rhin”, & “Rail Bhara O Railer Byay”, *Prabashi*, Baishakh O Aswin, 1329 B.S. (c.1922)

3. Railways, connecting every corner of Bengal delivered foreign goods, which eventually destroyed the indigenous trades and crafts.
4. The British government. focused on building railways, neglecting irrigation systems, which devastated the agriculture of Bengal.
5. Excessive investment in building railways and an increase in rail fares also caused economic losses in India.¹⁰¹

long with that, *Prabashi*, published so many reports explaining how railways caused economic exploitation by employing a significant number of Europeans and Anglo-Indians rather than Indians and paying high salaries to white men. It also complained about the loss of traditional professionals such as cart men, boatmen, etc. since railways replaced all those professions.¹⁰²

The concept of such economic exploitation was first discussed by economic nationalist Dadabhai Naoroji who also was responsible for coining the term "Drain of Wealth," Subsequently other economic nationalists such as R. C. Dutt and R. P. Dutt endorsed the theory by providing numerous arguments.¹⁰³ They accused the railways of economic extortion as well as the ruin of small-scale rural industries and the agrarian economy. Several local newspapers spoke out against the economic extortion committed by the introduction of railways in Bengal and throughout India as soon as they began operating. The local Bengali and English newspapers also from time to time discussed drain of wealth in their editorials or regular news.

For instance, *Prabashi*, in 1906, wrote, "The foremost intention of the spread of railways was to expand the commercial trade to every nook and cranny of the country."¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Sakharam Deushkar wrote, "as the railways expanded, so did the English's wealth, but we lost our property. Railways were a major means of gaining property in the country. Indeed, trade expanded with the advent of railways, resulting in greater capital growth for foreign merchants than for indigenous."

¹⁰¹ "Rail Bistarer jonya Rhin", & "Rail Bhara O Railer Byay", *Prabashi*, Baishakh O Aswin, 1329 B.S. (c.1922)

¹⁰² Railway Board O Bharatiya Shramik, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1334 B. S. (c. 1927)pp. 29-32

¹⁰³ Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India Under Early British Rule 1757-1837*. London Routledge & Kegan paul Ltd & Dutt, R. P., (1940) *India To-Day*, London:Victor Gollancz Ltd.

¹⁰⁴ ' Bharatbarshiya Railway' *Prabashi*, Jaishtha, 1313/ (c.1906.)

(Translation Mine).¹⁰⁵ The issue is also found mentioned in literature written during the period. For instance, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, in his novel, *Srikanta* (written in 1927) that the primary goal of the country's railway network expansion was to increase commercial profits for the British, by exporting crops.¹⁰⁶

Indian wealth was squeezed through land revenue and other means and then drained off to England, leaving no surplus in India. Dadabhai stated “that the economic drain continued even after the completion of the railways. The tiredness generated by the drain is what prevents us from constructing railways with our resources.”¹⁰⁷ In India, the construction of the railway and its interest on loans and later profit from it went out of the country, and among other innumerable channels, the railway was also a means of draining wealth.¹⁰⁸ In this regard, *Prabashi* wrote: This country's exports exceed its imports by around 37 crore rupees. Imports totaled 132,72,15,076 during the year ending March 31, 1903; exports were 169,78,94,230. This is because India must pay several crores of rupees for the interest on railway capital, pensions of the English staff of the Indian Secretary's office, and so on. All of it had to be sent as an export. The only way to save the country from this anomalous and disastrous scenario is to boycott.¹⁰⁹ *Prabashi* continued to write about the ill effects of drain of wealth, pointing out vital issues regarding the loan from London to invest in railway construction in India.¹¹⁰

The newspapers made it clear that England was harming India in many ways.¹¹¹ *Prabashi* additionally emphasised on the importance of waterways and water carriages which were sufficient for goods and passengers in eastern Bengal. Furthermore, it would have been better if the government would have approved the constitution of good roads to drive motor vehicles, -instead of constructing miles of roads. It further said that, “It is undeniable that it would improve traffic and business, but two-thirds of the money would go to the people of England.”¹¹² *Prabashi* also

¹⁰⁵ Deushkar, S. G. (1904). ‘Rail O khal’, *Deshar Kotha*, 1904, Kolkata. p.54

¹⁰⁶ Chattopadhyay, S. C. (1961). *Srikanta*, vol iii, Srikanta Akhanda, Kolkata: Indian Association Publishing, p.124

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.54

¹⁰⁹ “Pearson Saheber ‘National Life and Character’, *Prabashi*, Agrahayan, 1313, (c.)

¹¹⁰ ‘Rail Bistarar Janya Rhin’, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1329 b.S. (c. 1922)

¹¹¹ ‘Nutan Railway Line’, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, , 1331 B. S. (c.1922), p.832

¹¹² ‘Purba Bonge Rail Bistar’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1334 B.S. (c.1927), pp 455-456

mentioned the statement of Mr. Swift, (as stated on August 14, 1890) a Member of Parliament, that eight pennies from each shilling came to England from investments in the expansion of railways in India.¹¹³

Another method of drain of wealth was through the fare that was charged from the passengers and the companies. It is an established fact that the increase in rail fares across the subcontinent including Bengal caused a significant drain on the economy. The fares were used up by the European railway companies and the government and were transported out of India, in form of salaries and other expenses. Higher rail fares made transportation more expensive for both goods and passengers. Many news reports reflect that the rail fare was increasing throughout the colonial period. For instance, *Prabashi*, shows that after the first world war the fare had been increased abnormally which caused national loss. One reason for the increase in rail fares, towards the end of the British government, was that the expense of running the railways was more than it was before the war. But *Prabashi*, however, countered this argument and wrote that, -“the expensive portions of the rail goods that were purchased from England at a high cost, and the remark on the fare hike is completely incorrect.”¹¹⁴ *Prabashi* continued to protest against the hike of rail fare. *Prabashi* in *Baishakh-Aswin, 1329* (c. 1922) reported that passenger fare was increased before, which affected the third class passengers, in addition with that goods fare and fare on booking room in goods train also increased.¹¹⁵ *Prabashi* also shows a comparison on rail fare with the fare of other countries to explain squeezing of the Indian economy: “a labourer could travel 60 miles with his one day salary, but in India, a labourer of the same category could travel only 14 miles.”¹¹⁶

The employment of Europeans in colonial railways facilitated a significant drain of wealth from Bengal's economy. European employees often would receive higher salaries and benefits compared to their Indian counterparts, leading to the outflow of financial resources from the region. Pundit Chandrika Prasad Tiwari, an assistant traffic superintendent of the Indian Railways, was an expert on railways, who travelled to major European countries and collected comparative information. He explained that the cost of Indian Railways could be reduced by twenty crores if

¹¹³ ‘Purba Bonge Rail Bistar’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1334 B.S. (c.1927), pp. 455-456

¹¹⁴ ‘Rail Bhara O Railer Byay’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Jaishtha, 1329B. S. (c.1922.), p.152

¹¹⁵ ‘Rail Maaler Bhara’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1329 B.S. (c.1922), p.150

¹¹⁶ ‘Rail Bhara O Railer Byay’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Jaishtha, 1329B. S. (c.1922.), p.152

its misuse had been reduced.¹¹⁷ Moreover, since the inception of railways Europeans were being employed in higher posts. In addition, the formation of the Acworth Committee resulted in the creation of higher and more expensive posts and the employment of British people, which proves the patronisation of English people and the guzzling of India's wealth. In this regard Roy Saheb Chandrika Prasad's comment is relevant, where he compares the salaries of high ranking railway officials with that of officials of the other countries such as Japan, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and China etc. He says, *"Looking at the salary rates in these countries, it seems very unfair to collect such high salaries from the Indian taxpayers for the railway employees of the country. One would be surprised to see the stark difference between the salaries of the highest-ranking employees and the lowest. While the people of the country were busy thinking about food and clothing, the Europeans were enjoying the resources of our country. This shows that one employee would have received as much as 350 or 400 Indian workers were paid. Does he alone need as much money as 350 or 400 Indian employees? Is it comparable to any other country in the world? The minimum pay of an Indian Railway agent is 400 times more than the pay of a lower class employee."*¹¹⁸ (Translation Mine)

The data regarding salary disparity and discrimination between European and Indian employees also was covered in another newspaper *Modern Times*.

Table 4:¹¹⁹

In Gazetted posts (Engineering)				
Name of the post	Number	European	Indian	Salary (in Rs)
Departmental	1	1	—	3000

¹¹⁷ "Railwayer Byay", *Prabashi*, 'Kartik-Chaitra', 1329 B.S. (c. 1922), p.125

¹¹⁸ 'Railway Karmocharir Betan', *Prabashi*, Kartik -Chaitra, 1330 B.S. (c.1927) p.568-569

¹¹⁹ *Modern Times*, January 1923

Superintendent				
Sub-superintendent	2	2	–	2150
District Engineer	15	15	–	1625
District Deputy Chief	43	39	4	1215

Table 5: ¹²⁰

Salary for Non-Gazetted Posts (in Rupees)		
	Anglo-Indian/European	Indian
Station Master	395	85-150
Assistant Station master	325	85
Guard	210	130
Ticket Checker	75	45

¹²⁰ *Modern Times*, January 1923

Regarding this discrimination, *Prabashi* also commented to say that the Government of India favoured capitalists at the cost of its railway employees. It said that, “*Companies are irresponsibly working against India's interests by structuring their own dividends and interest. As a result, the entire Indian people, particularly Indian Railway workers, are bearing the brunt of the effects of this arbitrariness. This system of forceful coercion has begun on India's government railways, such as the Eastern Bengal Railway, East Indian Railway, Great Indian Peninsular Railway, North Western Railway, and Awadh-Rohilakhand Railways.*”¹²¹

4. Railways and Bengal Economy: Newspaper Coverage

Another aspect of drain of wealth was that the wealth that was being generated at the cost of small scale industries was being transported back to England. Newspapers such as *Prabashi* covered this issue. It reported that the British businessmen were extracting as much profit as they could from India, by creating speedier communication systems, accruing advantages of one-way free trade, destroying indigenous businesses, and establishing British monopolies on all types of business. The news report did agree that there were certain advantages of railways to the economy as it led to commercialization of agriculture which resulted in a boom in exports. However, the process *Prabashi* deemed was not organic but 'forced' as peasants were compelled to grow commercial crops to pay high land revenues or rents. The newspaper report reiterated the conclusions of the economic nationalists and said that the railways were more beneficial to the colonialists than to Bengal. It enabled British traders to collect cotton and raw materials at reduced costs from remote areas of Bengal to England, where the finer clothes were prepared by machines at low cost to sell in Bengal as well as in India, which displaced regional arts and crafts. In addition, when foreign commodities infiltrated even hamle-alleyways of Bengal, traditional methods of subsistence for a significant number of people rapidly disappeared. Many individuals had to rely on land and other low-wage jobs.¹²² This relentless economic squeeze left the people of Bengal teetering on the edge of uncertainty and fear. For instance, Dwarkanath Tagore, who envisioned industrialisation by

¹²¹ Railway Board O Bharataiya Shramik, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1927, pp.29-32

¹²² 'Rail Bistarar Jonya Rhin', *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1922, pp.150-52

using British deftness, working skill, capital, and labour in India, was eventually forced to admit that “they would seize everything from the countrymen- the life, liberty, and fortune”.¹²³

Prabashi, in 1922 reported another method through which railways caused damage to the local small scale industries was the hike of rail fare and rent for booking the room in goods carriages. This increasing fare for freight was burdensome for Indian producers and traders.¹²⁴ Additionally, the farmers and small businessmen had to pay higher taxes on the goods to sell their produce, whereas the British producers did not have to pay any taxes. Bengali manufacturers had to pay octroi duty along with other duties which caused a dent in their profits. This forced them to abandon their traditional crafts which ultimately led to the destruction of the small scale of trade in Bengal as well as in India.¹²⁵

The focus of the colonial government and private rail companies led to a fractured and lopsided development of infrastructure in India as well as in Bengal. Since railways were considered to be the centre of all economic activities, less or negligible attention was paid to irrigation system. This was observed and reported by the newspapers of Bengal as early as 1856, just one year after the introduction of railways in Bengal. For instance, in 1856 *Sangbad Prabhakar* observed that the British Indian Government had constructed railways for profits and had paid least attention or even were least interested in the expansion of the Ganges by digging it further which was considerably more important for the purposes of irrigation and local trade that time.¹²⁶ The negligence of waterways and other forms of transport continued even in the twentieth century. The newspaper, *Prabashi* published articles in the decade of 1920's showcasing the negligence of the government to non-railway infrastructures. For instance, in an article published in 1924, it wrote that due to the expansion of railways, the waterways of the country have been neglected in many areas. Due to the building of embankments and dams, the flow of water was obstructed at many places.¹²⁷ Another article again published in *Prabashi* drew the attention of the readers towards continuous

¹²³ Gopal, G. (1967). *Bharater Shramik Andolonar Itihas*. Kolkata: Lok Itihas Prakashan, p.10

¹²⁴ ‘Rail Bhara O Railer Byay’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1922, p.152

¹²⁵ Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India Under Early British Rule 1757-1837*. London Routledge & Kegan paul Ltd. p.314

¹²⁶ *Sangbad Prabhakar*, 21st Jaishtha, 1263 B.S. (c.1856)

¹²⁷ ‘Nutan Railway Line’, *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1331 B.S. (c.1924), p.832

negligence of the government towards renovation of rivers and canals in East Bengal. This had led to the rivers and canals becoming unstable and dry and covered with hyacinth, which was not favourable for irrigation. The article accused the government of a deliberate omission of giving a budget for investment in canals, which would have benefited Indian agriculture.¹²⁸ This issue had been the focus of the writing of economic nationalists as well, like Rajani Palme Dutt. He says that when railway embankments were built, many existing canals were destroyed. Some areas that were cut off from the source of loam-bearing Ganges water gradually turned non-fertile and non-productive, while others that were inadequately drained, exhibited resultantly advanced levels of water logging. There had also been no attempt to build suitable embankments for the Ganges in its low course to avoid the massive erosion that has swallowed up villages, trees, and cultivated fields.¹²⁹

This issue was closely connected to destruction of small scale industries related to waterways resulting in chronic unemployment. Since Bengal was a riverine region and before the coming of railways, communication was mostly done by waterways, many people subsisted by earning their livelihood around that transport system. The newspaper *Prabashi* observed this in their article published in 1924. It said “the boat-building industry provided a livelihood for a group of people. Due to the introduction of railways they lost their jobs.”¹³⁰ This could be corroborated with the data provided by Romesh Chandra Dutt who says that around 30,000 boatmen at that time were engaged in water-transport and boat building. Many craftsmen and bullock owners had lost their jobs due to the construction of railways.¹³¹ It is an established fact that the major focus of the government only being on the railways had also harmed those professions which were related to transportation by land. Chronic unemployment was observed by the newspapers and economic nationalists in such cases as well. Traditional transport bearers, such as bullock carts, palanquins, and human porters, had long been the backbone of transportation in Bengal. However, with the advent of railways, these modes of transport quickly became outdated. On the other hand, many of the people who were engaged before in trades became jobless. In this regard *Prabashi* in 1922

¹²⁸ Purba Bange Rail Bistar, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1334 B. S. (c. 1927), p.455

¹²⁹ Dutt, R. P., (1940) *India To-Day*. London:Victor Gollancz Ltd. p.196

¹³⁰ Purba Bange Rail Bistar, *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1334.S. (c. 1924), p. 456

¹³¹ Dutt, R. C. (1906). *Economic History of India Under Early British Rule 1757-1837*, Vol. 1. London Routledge & Kagan paul Ltd. p.335

wrote that foreign goods reached the alleys of villages so local crafts were disappearing and the artists who were living depending on those crafts were losing their jobs.¹³² In 1924 *Prabashi* again wrote that new railway lines were opened to deliver the British goods to interior areas which caused many trades to be doomed and eventually destroyed. As a result many people had to take farming as their profession or wandered for other laborious jobs. *Prabashi* in the same article further added that this situation caused half starvation, starvation and famine consequently.¹³³

It becomes clear from the above narrative that the newspapers of Bengal were conscious of the changes due to the introduction of railways and its impact on people's lives. They also related and wrote about the impact that railways had on the environment.

5. Print Media: Discourses on Environmental Impact of Railways

The close connection between western imperialism and environmental degradation is of particular interest today. Indeed, the global environment has been profoundly altered by western capitalism, first through European trade and later through colonialism, whose dynamic expansion has disrupted various biomes on different continents. Nineteenth century developments such as the Industrial Revolution, capitalism and the search for new markets, forced drastic measures upon the colonies which had grave environmental impacts. Western interventions not only practically reshaped the social, ecological, and demographic characteristics of the colonial habitats, but they also ensured that the subsequent changes would be most profitable for the Europeans.¹³⁴ The Indian colonies were not exempted from this interference. For their material gain, one of the most important steps taken by the British was the expansion of railways in India. The triumphal journey of railway expansion in India started in India in 1853 and in Bengal in 1854. Since then, ecological degradation started in Bengal. This section focuses on the environmental impact of the introduction of railways, as reported by newspapers and journals which can also be corroborated by other literary documents.

¹³² 'Rail Bistarer Jonya Rhin', *Prabashi*, Baishakh-Aswin, 1329 B.S. (c1922), pp.150-51

¹³³ 'Nutan Railway Line', *Prabashi*, kartik-Chaitra, 1331 B.S. (c.1924), p. 832

¹³⁴ Gudgil, M., & Guha, R. (1992). *The Fissured Land and Ecological History of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 116

To increase trade and commerce more extensively, the expansion of the railway was a must. Up until 1942, Bengal's railway network had covered thousands of miles. A large quantity of land was required for the creation of this huge communication network. The natural green trees and shrubs of the surrounding jungle and mountainous terrain had to be destroyed for all of the projects to pass through, resulting in deforestation and deterioration in forest biodiversity, which not only affect forests but also forest dwellers. To construct the thousands of miles of railway,-- fuel, sleepers, and other timbers were required, and to do so, they had to chop the trees like *sal*, *teak*, and other trees in abundance, which impacted the forest to a greater extent. Several embankments, dams, and bridges had to be built to establish railways in riverine Bengal, which had a considerable impact on the environment and natural water regimes.

Before the expansion of railways in Bengal, the forest coverage was large mostly due to the low population. To build railway lines, vast tracts of forest land required for the railway projects were cleared to make it functional. As has been mentioned earlier, the first passenger train in Bengal ran from Howrah to Hooghly on 15th August 1854 and the track was extended to Raniganj (88 km) via Burdwan and Durgapur, and further extended up to Asansol (106 km) in July 1868. Railway lines from Asansol towards Jharkhand and from Birbhum towards Midnapur via Purulia were constructed through dry deciduous forests. The railways that have gone through the northeast and northern areas of undivided Bengal were mostly wet evergreen forests, tropical semi-evergreen forests, and tropical moist evergreen forests. Many railway projects were undertaken during the colonial period. The railway lines were constructed causing deforestation. Railway project such as Cooch Behar Railway, Jorhat -Provincial Railway, Darjeeling -Himalayan Railway, Darjeeling - Kishananj Railway, Siliguri-Sevoke Railway, Assam -Bengal Railway, Bengal-Assam Railway, Bengal -Dooars Railway, Tejpur -Balipata Railway, Chaparmukh -Shilarghat Railway, Katakhal - Lalabazar Railway, Purulia -Ranchi Railway, Purulia -Chakradharpur Railway, Purulia Asansol Railway, and Kharagpur- Midnapore railway under Bengal Nagpur Railway, etc.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Mitra, R. (1952). Jogajog Byabastha: Railpath, *Kolikata Darpan*, Vol 1. pp.197-246

This demonstrates that almost the entire region of North and North Eastern Bengal was connected through railway lines that crossed rivers and cut through forests and mountains. The Darjeeling-Himalayan Railway Line destroyed its entire forest ecosystem. In addition, the moist evergreen forest area was indiscriminately cleared, during the construction of the Assam-Bengal railway for the railway line that connected Chatgaon to Assam.¹³⁶ The Bengal-Dooars Railway line was built, by destroying the mountainous woodland topography. Following the Forest Act of 1864, a vast number of trees were felled from the hill forests of Darjiling, Terai, Jilapara, and Sikkim to manufacture sleepers for the railway tracks. The forests of the Chittagong and Dooars regions were cleared in 1868, and Sal trees were cut down to provide timber and sleepers for railways.¹³⁷ Siliguri-Darjeeling Railway was opened in 1880, connecting Siliguri to Darjeeling Bazaar through Kurseong and Sonada. To cut costs of tunnelling, the Eastern Bengal Railway preferred to lay the entire line by destroying the hill forests. The Darjeeling -Himalayan Railway expansion resulted in large-scale deforestation by cutting evergreen wood. The railway project from Siliguri to Giel Khola via Shevoke and Riang was completed in 1914-15. Almost the entire wooded region through which the railway route was built, was devastated. The Sal trees in that area were used for rail line construction, and other tree species were also cut down to ensure the smooth expansion and operation of the railway.¹³⁸ The Khershan -Bengal Railway was built from Baikathapur's Bansari in South Sevoke to Saptagram. Baikunthapur was covered with Sal and other fire -resistant green, fresh trees.¹³⁹ Overall, it can be concluded that the majority of the land required for railways in north and northeastern Bengal was nearly full of forests, and by destroying the same, the projects were completed, thus causing considerable damage to the ecosystem and environment.

Additionally, not only the forest was cleared for railway construction, but cities centred on the station were also developed. Many cities were built around railway stations in North Bengal and the North Western districts. Several settlements were developed by clearing forested regions. For

¹³⁶ Allen, B.C., Howard H. F. & et. al. (1857). *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India 1857*. Delhi: K.M. Mittal, p. 86

¹³⁷ Shivaramakrishnan, K. (1997). A Limited Forests Conservancy in South-West Bengal 1864-1912, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56(1), pp. 75-115

¹³⁸ Mitra, R. (1952). Jogajog byabastha: Railpath, *Kolkata Darpan*, Vol 1. pp.197-246

¹³⁹ Mitra, A.(1951). *The West Bengal District Handbooks Jalpaiguri*, p. xxii, retrieved from <http://www.new.dli.ernet.in/handle/2015/100238>

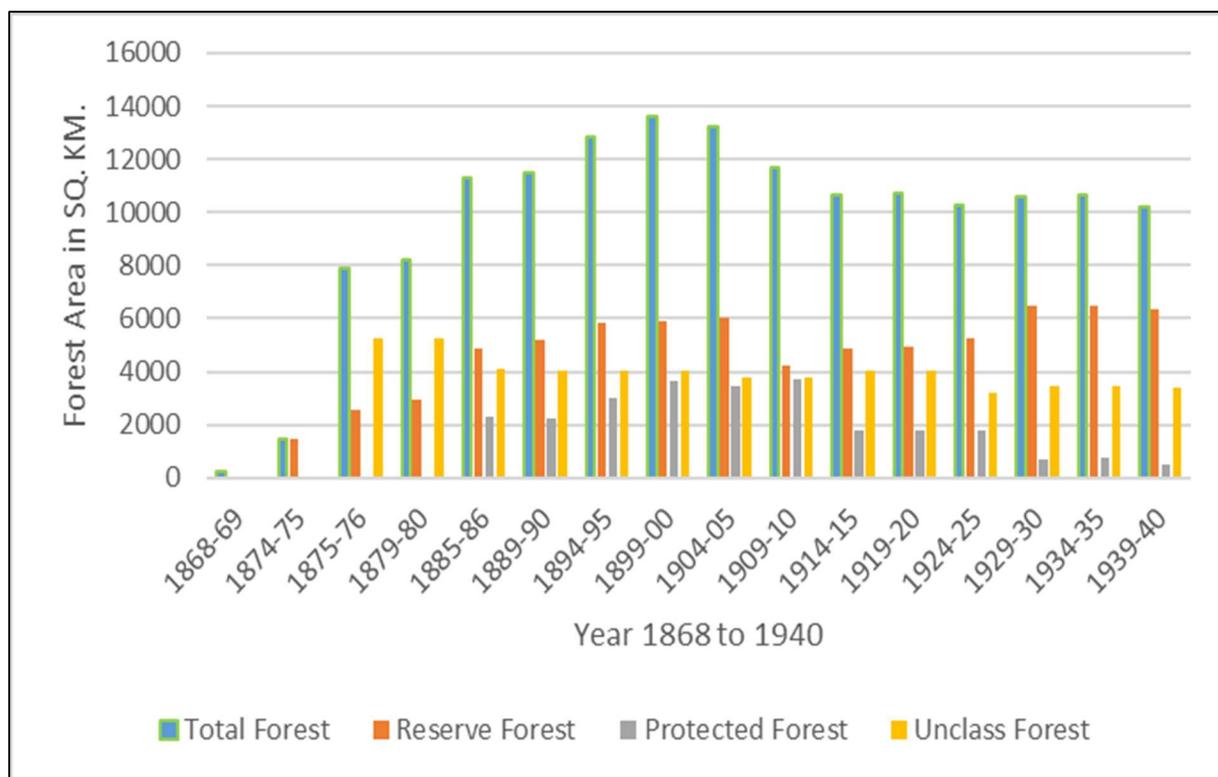
example, the cities of Asansol and Raniganj were built around railway stations. Railway focal points such as stations, workshops, management offices, and other infrastructure became crucial for the growth of urbanisation and expansion of these two cities. The Raja of Panchkoot sold a large tract of jungle-infested land to the railways for the construction of rails and stations. Shergah was the name of that huge area that had been given to the railway and was covered with wild bush. The Asansol project began with the clearance of the forest.¹⁴⁰ Station-centric towns were built in various parts of Bengal for connectivity and livelihood, but the clearing of forests for the construction of railways and settlements in those areas had a significant impact on the ecological balance. Forest dwellers and animals living in the forest were severely impacted.

A large amount of timber is required for massive buildings, shipbuilding and railways imperilled Bengal and India's forests. Colonisation caused significant environmental changes in the forests of Bengal and other regions, and European colonists were the representatives, accompanied by Bengali/ Indian traders and contractors. These two types of colonial economic infrastructure were inextricably tied to Bengal's deforestation. These woods supplied raw materials for the railways, which helped to establish India as a market for British goods, a source of cheap raw resources, and a hub for capital investment. Land settlement for railway construction necessitated the clearance of forested regions. Huge amounts of wood were required in the early days to make carriages, fuel, and long poles and sleepers. Several species of trees in the forest were indiscriminately killed in the process, and no replacement was planned for them.¹⁴¹

Bengal had a total forest area of 14 thousand square miles, including reserved forest areas, protected areas, unclassified state forest areas, and leasehold areas. The statistics are listed below.

¹⁴⁰ er.indianrailways.gov.in

¹⁴¹ Forsyth, C. J. (1889). *The 10th of Central India notes on their forests and wild tribe natural history and sports*. London, Chapman and Hull publication PP. 214-15; Stebbing, E. P. (1922). *The Forests of India*, vol. 1, London, The May Flower Press, pp. 521-22



Changing Pattern- Forest Cover of Bengal during the Colonial Period¹⁴²

From the Terai in the Doers of the Central Himalayas to Mymensingh, Chittagong, Sylhet, Assam, Tripura in the east, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri in the north, Dhalbhum in Chotanagpur, Manbhum, Palamau in Ranchi, Rajmahal, and Bankura (21.47 percent of the total forest area) in the west were densely covered forest and bushy areas. *Sal, teak, pine*, and cedar were the best trees in the entire forest region. The majority of the sleepers used in various projects of East Indian Railway Company were made of sal wood. Sal wood was the highest quality of the trees mentioned above.¹⁴³ Although several types of wooden sleepers were used on different lines, the Eastern Bengal Railway sleepers were primarily made of sal trees collected from the Terai in the Doers of the Central Himalayas to Mymensingh. On the Calcutta to Jabbalpur line, sal timber was utilised. On the Tirhut line, sal trees and pine were used as sleepers, as were sal trees and creosoted pine on the North-Western Railway, sal wood on the Bengal Nagpur

¹⁴² Ghosh, M. & Gosh, S. (2019). Historical Geography of Forestry and Forest Culture, Sub Himalayan West Bengal, 1757 to 2015. *Space and Culture, India*, p.219

¹⁴³ Anonymous (1892). Durability of Railway Sleepers in *The Indian Fosters, Vol. xviii(i)*, p. 379,

Railway, and creosoted pine and sal wood on the North Bengal Railway.¹⁴⁴ The Eastern Railway, on the other hand, selected sal wood as the ideal material for sleepers. Sal wood, which was more durable than other trees, was the finest choice for railway sleepers and seating.¹⁴⁵ Eastern Railway, on the other hand, picked sal wood as the ideal material for sleepers. Sal wood was the finest choice for railway sleepers and seats since it was more durable than other trees.¹⁴⁶ All of the sleepers necessary for the Bengal Doors line were thought to have come from Jalpaiguri's restricted forests in West Bengal. According to a survey, only 800 sleepers were taken from there, with the rest coming from other forest areas in Bengal.¹⁴⁷ Sleepers for the Assam-Bengal Railway were primarily sourced from the forests of Burma and the Terai Valley. The charm of the Jalpaiguri forest was the presence of Sal trees. These trees were more valuable and of higher grade than any other trees found in India. During the British period, this forest produced the highest grade of timber for railway construction.¹⁴⁸ Each mile of construction necessitated the use of 17,600 sleepers.¹⁴⁹ Bengal had 4296.92 miles of railway built up until 1905. Thus, based on this figure, the number of wooden sleepers required for the railway was $4296.92 \times 17600 = 786,29,792$. It should be noted, however, that the maximum lifespan of the sleepers was 13 to 14 years. That is every 13-14 years, the same number of sleepers or more would be necessary. Each year, about a million sleepers were necessary for the building of rail tracks.¹⁵⁰ The impact of this vast number of sleepers on Bengal's forests can be easily estimated. Sleepers were chosen from the best-treated plants. Most of the timber among those chosen was deemed to be waste. As a result, the introduction of the railway system was a boon to Indian timber dealers.¹⁵¹ Some trees were hacked

¹⁴⁴ Administrative Report on the Railway in India, IV. Reviews in *The Indian Forester*, 1892, volume 18(3) p. 229

¹⁴⁵ Anonymous (1892). Durability of Railway Sleepers. *The Indian Forester*, vol xviii (i), p.379

¹⁴⁶ Tucker, R.(1983). The British Colonial System and the Forests of Western Himalayas, 1815-1914, in Richard Tucker and John Richards (Ed.). *Global Deforestation and the 19th Century World Economy* Durham, 1983 p.159

¹⁴⁷ Report on the Railways in India for 1891-92, *The Indian Forester* 1892 volume 18 (1), p. 251

¹⁴⁸ *West Bengal District Gazetteer Jalpaiguri 1981*. Calcutta: published by Barun De and printed by N.K. Gossain and Co. Pvt. Ltd., p.117

¹⁴⁹ Anonymous, (1892). The History of Railway Sleepers. *The Indian Foster*, volume 18, 1892, p. 251

¹⁵⁰ Gadgil, M. & Guha, R. (1992). *This Fissured Land, An Ecological History of India*. Delhi, Oxford University Press p.123

¹⁵¹ Pouchapedas, J. (1995). Colonialism and Environment in India Comparative Study. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (33), retrieved from <https://www.epw.in/journal/1995/33/special-articles/colonialism-and-environment-india-comparative-perspective.html>

down indiscriminately to choose appropriate trees for timber.¹⁵² As a result, Bengal's diverse shal population was fast dwindling. No one, however, has accepted responsibility for its reproduction.¹⁵³ The conservation idea, which came from the Forest Department of Bengal, was also conceived with future enjoyment in mind.¹⁵⁴ Timbers were also used for other railway components in addition to sleepers. Long poles positioned at both sides of the railway and wood as fuel were especially important for the construction. Timbers were also required for numerous station structures, stations, and rest areas. Moreover, third and fourth-class carriages featured wooden floors and walls until 1885.¹⁵⁵ The railway project necessitated the use of massive amounts of bricks to construct infrastructure such as railway buildings, bridges, embankments, workshops, and platforms. Huge amounts of wood were required to burn these bricks, since, in the beginning, the furnace was lit by wood. For example, the East Indian Railway burned around 2 million bricks in the Hullohar Division of 17 miles in the second half of 1858; 4.5 million were ready for the furnace, and another 7 million were being cast. This division alone had 50 brick kilns and 16 lime kilns. The furnaces in these kilns were always kept burning with firewood supplied from the forests.¹⁵⁶ The amount of timber required for rail projects allows for an easy calculation of the forest effect.

Earlier on, solid and durable trees were collected from the forest for the construction of train carriages and gun cabins.¹⁵⁷ Wood was utilised as fuel for railway engines in an indiscriminate manner. Although wood is most commonly used as a fuel in South India, it was also used in Bengal in the initial stages. A figure for 1891 has been provided below to provide a context.

¹⁵² Guha, R. (2001). The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India. *Environmental History* 6 (2), *Special Issue Forest History in Asia*, 213 -38.

¹⁵³ Forsyth, C. J. (1889). *The Highlands of Central India Notes on Their Forests and Wild Tribes, Natural History, and Sports*. London: Chapman and Hull publication, 214-15

¹⁵⁴ Stebbing, E. P. (1922). *The Forests of India*, Vol. I. London: The Bodley Head Limited. p.521

¹⁵⁵ Mitra, R. (1952). Jogajog Byabastha:Railpath. *Kolikata Darpan*, p.207

¹⁵⁶ Kerr, I. J. (1997). Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900. *American Journal of Ophthalmology*, 56(1). p. 145

¹⁵⁷ Anonymous (1892). 'The Andaman Islands', *The Indian Foresters*, volume -18 (2) in November 1892. p. 398

Table: 6¹⁵⁸

State	Quantity (Ton)	Year
Bengal and North-western Rail	1,876	1891
Madras Rail	82,776	1891
Burma Rail	2,642	1891

A considerable number of medium-sized poles were necessary to create the fences along both sides of the railway line. The quality of the sal tree drew railway companies in large numbers. On either side of the line, the poles were used to suspend the wire that constituted the fence. While other trees were considered to be used in these projects, the sal tree was thought to be more durable.¹⁵⁹ In Eastern Bengal, the railway once again held a monopoly on timber and other trades. Trees were cut from the forests of Western Dooars and Baikantapur for this commerce and floated down the Brahmaputra river to be utilised in various railway projects throughout Assam.¹⁶⁰ All of these uses of timber for railways are significant examples of deforestation to a large extent.

Establishment of the railway industry not only affected the forests but also the forest dwellers such as tribal groups (Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kora Lodha etc.). These were non-literate societies which lived outside the margins of the village areas. Tribal forests were the focus of commercial

¹⁵⁸ Administrative Report on The Railway in India for 1891 - 92 in *The Indian Foresters*, volume 18(1), 1892, p. 435

¹⁵⁹ Forsyth, C. J. (1889). *The Highlands of Central India Notes on Their Forests and Wild Tribes, Natural History, and Sports*. London: Chapman and Hull publication, p.219

¹⁶⁰ Howard H. F.'s *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India*, 1857, p.xxii.

exploitation by local landlords and other intermediaries in order to increase tribal levies. The tribals were pushed back in such a way that they were confined with small pieces of jungle lands known as Damin-i-Ko, the tribal villages. It was the product of an endeavour that began as a joint initiative of British Indian politics which spearheaded the tribal movement in 1855-56. Now here's what it really means: how the railway project affected the tribals, which could be traced back to newly cultivated land, while the tribals couldn't escape by moving deeper and deeper into the forest, but their settlement was not spared yet. As much as they cultivated for themselves by clearing the jungle, the local supremes were snatching from them to get into their control for more revenues. Along with them, the usury moneylenders and small traders from outside the periphery of the tribals made their lives miserable.¹⁶¹ When railway growth began in Birbhum, Manbhum, Singhbhum Dhalbhum Rajmahal, Bankura Medinipur Jharkhand, Bhagalpur, and other regions, these labourers were engaged at low salaries on various railway projects. Railway staff and subordinate officers used to gather chickens, goats, and other necessities from tribals for free under various guises. When the tribals complained, they were tortured indescribably. Railway subordinate officers frequently abused their women. The torture of two tribal women and the murder of a tribal man have been officially recorded.¹⁶² Hence, when the tribal insurrection against the *baniyas* or local or city moneylenders and the British enterprise erupted in 1855-56, the railways, offices, railway masters, and other personnel became the main targets.

Railways aided in numerous ways, from growth to jobs, by breaking down Indian society's segregation. They also mobilised the stagnant tribals by incorporating them into the colonial labour-capitalist relationship. Railway construction efforts liberated people from centuries of servitude.¹⁶³ *The Calcutta Review* raised a question-If this is the case, then why the tribals revolted. Why have they repeatedly repatriated themselves from their workplace? Why were railways and railway engineers targeted in their attacks? The tribals demolished the entire railway buildings in Pulsa after only eight days of insurrection. According to a British account, tribal insurgents set fire to all the bungalows along the railway line from Rajmahal to Pulsa in 1856.¹⁶⁴ The railways and

¹⁶¹ 'Sanotal Asoshontosh,' *Prabashi*, Kartik-Chaitra, 1263 B.S. (c. 1856)

¹⁶² Santhal Extortion by Railway Employee, *The Calcutta Review*, 1865, P. 235

¹⁶³ Hunter, W. W. (1868). *Annals of Rural Bengal*. London Smith, Elder & Co. P255

¹⁶⁴ Guha, R. (1999). *An Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. Durham, London: Duke University Press p.140

their offices took the worst of the damage over the week. On the basis of that damage, Richardson sent a report to his superiors on 17th July 1855 accounting- "The object of the Hillman appears to be to destroy everything connected with the railway works, and their anger has been roused, I have no doubt, by the railway officers carrying on intrigues with their women as well as bullying the labourers."¹⁶⁵ This report is supported by Burdwan Divisional Commissioner in Charge. He continues, "that the Sonthal women have been disgraced and this injury calls amongst them for vengeance".¹⁶⁶ That is, the harassment of the tribal women, as well as their unbearable mental pain at work, contributed to the outbreak of violence against the railway authorities. Hence, it can be discerned that the introduction of railways not only affected the physical environment but also had an impact on the mental and physical health of people.

The railways had an undeniable impact on public health in colonial Bengal, as well as elsewhere. Pre-colonial Bengali society was marked by social seclusion and social stratum discrepancies. The rapid communication infrastructure, particularly train mobility, was critical in breaking that societal immobility in all senses. It offered societies speed and mobility. Yet, this mobility had put the populace in grave danger of epidemics and other diseases. The construction of canals and embankments for railways against the natural flow of streams had a negative impact on the ecosystems, resulting in communicable diseases.

Not only that, but living in filthy conditions in tiny regions of working class people who had travelled long distances for various railway projects increased the prevalence of disease transmission among them. Likewise, trains were used to aid the people of Bengal who were in critical health circumstances by distributing medications. Many diverse discussions were carried out, mostly blaming the railways for plagues and diseases and others extolling their value. Nonetheless, there are a number of scattered reports and arguments about the extent to which the railway influenced disease outbreaks. Viewing such reports and discussions via indigenous and colonial lenses a comprehensive picture has been provided here. An attempt is made to discuss

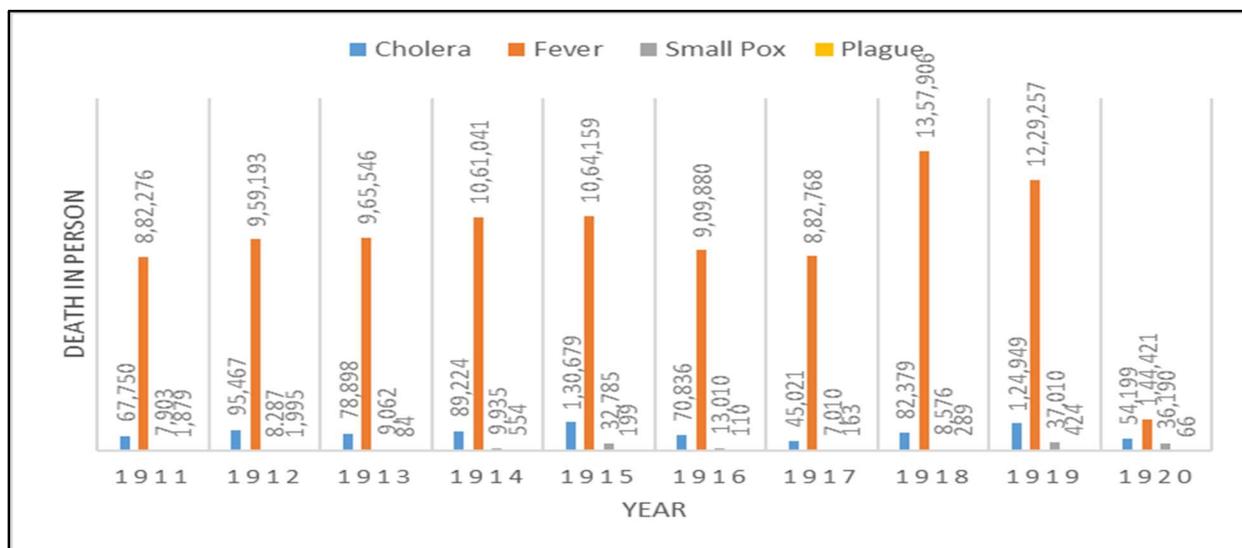
¹⁶⁵ Guha, R. (1999). *An Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. Durham, London: Duke University Press p140

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. p.143

the impact of railways on public health in Bengal by highlighting current government reports and information, media conversations, and current speeches on the subject.

The body survives by fighting and adapting to the surrounding environment. Everyone is familiar with Darwin's theory on the subject. According to Indian Ayurvedic traditions, when one of the Panchabhutas (five elements) and Consciousness, which comprise the body, is out of balance, the body loses immunity and becomes vulnerable to outside diseases. It is only natural for the Indian body and mind to adapt to the Indian environment. Throughout the British period, however, both the Indian body and intellect were required to adjust to the alien (European) society, culture, governance, economy, and new scientific discoveries. Along with new inventions Europeans brought new weeds and diseases with them to India. As a result, both old and new diseases were accompanied by new material changes that influence the body and mind in a variety of ways. The arrival of steamers, mills, cars, and massive iron chariots had a significant impact on the Indian economy and health policy. Indigenous malaria, seasonal fever, diarrhoea, and other diseases existed before the introduction of European power, but with the arrival of European power, foreign infected germs infiltrated the Indian soil and significantly increased its incidence. Railways were a driving force in this transfer. Every year, the rate of transmission of this fever was increasing.

Various communicable diseases and their number of deaths per mile in Bengal has been given below:¹⁶⁷



There was no complaint found from the commencement of the railway about the embankments built by the railway company and their influence on the spread of malaria. It took a while to figure out what was causing the rapid spread of malaria and other infectious fevers. Yet, the locals were aware of the water logging in the embankments, which was causing the mosquitoes to multiply rapidly. The public and the government both noticed an increase in mortality. *Sadharani, Prabashi, Sangbad Prabhakar*, and several vernacular and local English newspapers covered the ensuing tragic situation. A committee was constituted in 1864 to study the aetiology of malaria, with Raja Digambara Mitra, a Bengali, chosen as its representative. Raja Digambara Mitra was the first to draw public attention to the role of railways in triggering malaria outbreaks. Together with the initial report, he sent a supplemental two-page report in which he wrote- "*Remembering that the direction of the natural drainage of the villages situated along the river banks inland we have no difficulty in believing that it is impeded by the railway embankments on both sides. So we are strongly recommend to improve the internal drainage of the village by making open waterways to carry off surface water directly to any neighbouring river, canal or bill (swamp).*"¹⁶⁸ He explained

¹⁶⁷ *Health Book of Howrah Municipality- 1916 to 1934*. Dr G.Batra, Assistant Director of Public Health Bengal, Government of Bengal Public Health Department, See Forward page.

¹⁶⁸ Chunder, B. (1893). *Digambar Mitra, His Life and Career*. Published by Kolkata Hair Press, 1867-68, p123-24

that numerous canals branching off the Hooghly and other rivers have drainages on both sides, obstructing the flow of water. Similarly, the Eastern Bengal railway and its feeders have crossed the water channels of villages on the eastern bank of the river Hooghly, as well as other villages further inland but to the west of the line, and hindered the drainage of those places. "As a result, Chagda, Kachrapara Haliashahor, and many others similarly situated have suffered," he added.

An inquiry committee was set up to look into the cause of the disease, headed by the Chief Engineer of the Railways, Colonel Nicholls. On 4th March 1869, he issued a report in which he stated that the railway embankments in Bengal had not obstructed the drainages and it was not responsible for the onset of the disease. But, if there are any impediments, they should be removed.¹⁶⁹ Because the report was written by a railway engineer, the account will almost certainly be favourable to the government. He used the term 'some obstruction' to signify that there were at least some obstructions which had been instructed to remove. During an epidemic of 'Burdwan fever' in 1872 another commission was sent to explore the reason. The chief officer of Burdwan was in charge of this inquiry. Local residents and the district medical officer were requested to submit a survey report. This report was prepared using a variety of reports by Burdwan's chief officer. He remarked that "Eastern Bengal did in no way interfere with drainage". While other sub-district officials supported the report, the District Magistrate of North Twenty-four Parganas did not, claiming that the railway and road embankments at Haliashahar and Barasat were mostly to blame for the epidemic fever there. It was alleged that the drainage had been so obstructed. After discussion with the commissioner in 1882, it was concluded that "the outbreak of fever can be attributed to local obstruction to drainage from waterways in roads and railways." But this report had not been accepted by the Lieutenant Governor and concluded that "While Raja Digambar Mitter's theory was possibly right in some respects and there was no obstruction from road and railways anyway for the causing of fever due to drainage obstacles."¹⁷⁰

A sanitary study from 1884 claims that malaria from the construction of railways in Dhaka and Mymensingh caused the outbreak, but a sanitary report from 1907 claims that the outbreak of fever

¹⁶⁹ *Report on the Drainage Committee, Bengal Calcutta*. The Bengal Secretariat press 1907 by Ronald Ross, pp. 400-4.

¹⁷⁰ Chunder, B. (1893). *Digambar Mitra, His Life and Career*. Published by Kolkata Hair Press, 1867-68, p. 125-26

in Murshidabad had nothing to do with the Eastern Bengal Railway. Rather, numerous reports have emphasised unclean household habits.¹⁷¹ Inspector General Dr. John Murarray blamed the development of cholera on the gathering of Indians at the pilgrimage site, demonstrating in a report that the 1868 Haridwar epidemic began with pilgrims congregating at the pilgrimage site. The infection spread for miles (Haridwar to Multan) as a result of that public gathering. At the same time, he claims that the trains in this area just served as carriers. Trains also played a significant part in disaster suppression and medical help. Many ran back to board the train after becoming ill and bewildered. Dr Jackson remarked in a report, “I deem the concept that a line of railway embankments could create a travelling epidemic like that in Burdwan as ludicrous and unworthy of serious examination.”¹⁷²

Ronald Ross claimed in a 1907 report that it was impossible to avoid noting the alleged detrimental impacts of roads, railways, and dams. During the current investigation, the same was asserted about the Eastern Bengal State Railway. The allegations raised against roads and railways were heightened in Digambara Mitra's 1864 report. Nonetheless, Ronald Ross believes that, while the report should not be exploited and the railways blamed, a thorough examination is required.

The report on this subject by Dr. C. A. Bentley should be mentioned. Dr. Bentley was the Director of the Government of Bengal's Public Health Department. Dr. Bentley cites Revd. G. Schurr and Dr. Sutherland in 1867, as well as three reports by Mr. Bholanath Banerjee in 1912, to explain the source of the Bengal malaria outbreak, particularly in East Bengal. The core of his theory is that dams and canals erected across rivers in Bengal for roads and railways generated unclean water, hindered natural river navigation, and increased the incidence of malaria.¹⁷³

Rabindranath Tagore spoke out against epidemics like malaria and the plague in a number of speeches, books, articles, poetry, and other literary works.¹⁷⁴ He stated that “Malaria claims the

¹⁷¹ *Report on the Drainage Committee, Bengal Calcutta*. The Bengal Secretariat press 1907 by Ronald Ross, p. 2.

¹⁷² Rogers, L. (1897). The Lower Bengal Burdwan Epidemic Fever Reviewed and Compared with the Present Assam Epidemic Malaria Fever (kala azar). *Indian medical gazette*, November, 1897, p.404

¹⁷³ Bentley, C. A. (1906). *Malaria and Agriculture in Bengal How to Reduce Malaria in Bengal by Irrigation Government of Bengal*. Public Health Department, Calcutta: Public Health Depart, pp. ix-xxix

¹⁷⁴ Note: See "Gora," "Chaturanga," "Didi," and "Native" of Rabindranath Tagore to learn more about the state of malaria-affected people and society, as well as the author's perspectives.

lives of hundreds of thousands of people every year, and those who survive it add to the world's overall mortality rate. This malaria is migrating from province to province and from east to west. The plague arrived like a one-night visitor and returned year after year for its thirst for blood unquenched. Famine continues to decimate our region's population, much as a tiger that has tasted human flesh once cannot resist the temptation. We can clearly see a deathly web encircling every nation.” Rabindra Nath Tagore urged the masses to rise and awake against the sources of all diseases in order to reawaken the strength within ourselves in joint ventures.¹⁷⁵ He spoke in the anti-malaria society urging people to act collectively to combat the disease.¹⁷⁶

In 1331 B.S. (c.1924) Rabindranath Tagore spoke to the Anti Malaria Society about the malaria pandemic. He stated , "It is true, very true, that malaria has arrived in places where there was previously no malaria in our country. One of the causes was that there were no trains in this country, as well as a lack of natural water. The drainage was not clogged before. The railway became a major source of mosquito breeding now. Without a doubt, the villages on both sides of the line have suffered greatly."¹⁷⁷

Bengali newspapers had been vocal about this as well. *Prabashi* wrote , "*It is not that the railways have not benefited the country,...(yet), it caused significant devastation. Malaria has emerged and spread in numerous areas as a result of railways disrupting typical water pathways*". In addition, major flooding had occurred in a number of regions. Massive outbreaks of infectious diseases such as influenza and plague were common due to expansion of railways. Because of the proliferation of railways, the country's waterways were neglected in many parts and impeded in others. It resulted in the loss of the country's health and inter-trade. Due to the government's over-inclination towards railways, they neglected waterways.¹⁷⁸ While constructing railways in eastern Bengal one report was published by *Prabashi* saying- "*It's not at all surprising that governments and companies from other countries would be keen on investing in and expanding railways. This*

¹⁷⁵ *Bangadarshan*, Jaishtha, 1313 B.S.(c.1906)

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Tagore, R. (1331 B. S.). *Speech on Malaria, Bagabashi*, Jaishtha, B. S.1331(c.1924) (Note: On 23rd February 1924, Rabindranath's presidential address at the fourth annual conference of Anti malaria Co-operative at Alfred Theater, Calcutta, was published in *Bangabashi* periodical in Jaishtha, 1331 B.S. (c. 1938) . In the previous year (1330 B.S.) also he called people to take initiatives to protect the malaria in a collective way.

¹⁷⁸ 'Notun Railway Line', *Prabaahi*, Kartik -Chaitra, 1331 B.S. (c. 1938) p. 832

interest has led the Indian government to decide to borrow 1.5 hundred crore rupees in order to improve and expand the nation's railway system. But, there are many more essential tasks in this nation than railway growth. Very little effort and expenditure has been spent on improving the health sector of the country. After making those improvements, they ought to focus on expanding the railways.”¹⁷⁹ In “Hind swaraj” Gandhiji raised the question of spreading communicable diseases in a very strident way¹⁸⁰. *Prabashi* also noted that East Bengal's river-canal (channels/ ditches/ trench) were becoming polluted. As a result of which Malaria spread due to the water logging in canals (channels/ ditches/ trench) after rain.¹⁸¹

There are also other reports accessible from government sources that show how the railway line affects public health. According to them, public health was affected in three ways. 1. The velocity of this transportation system led to rapid spread of contagious diseases. 2. Dams and canals built for railway development produced isolated marshes, which served as a breeding habitat for germs. These embankments and trench on both sides of the railway generated blocked water bodies and microbial infection. Workers living in filthy conditions surrounding the railway project and other railway workshops created an unhealthy climate.¹⁸²

Sheldon Watts and Ira Klein have linked the rise and spread of malaria in colonial India to the rapid commercialisation of agriculture, deforestation, railway expansion, embankment construction, and urbanisation that resulted from the monetisation of the colonial Indian economy in the nineteenth century.¹⁸³ Whilst the railway was the west's cultural and technological superiority¹⁸⁴ nationalist and other critiques connected¹⁸⁴ to how railways transmitted malaria and

¹⁷⁹ ‘Rail Bistarer Jonya Rhin’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh- Aswin 1329 B.S. (c.1922), pp. 150-51

¹⁸⁰ Gandhi, M. K. (1938). *Hind Swaraj, Or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad:Jivanji Dahiyabhai Desai, Navjivan Press, pp. 55-51

¹⁸¹ ‘Rail Bistarer Jonya Rhin’, *Prabashi*, Baishakh- Aswin, 1329 B.S. (c.1922), pp. 150-51

¹⁸² Klein, I. (1972). ‘Malaria and Mortality in Bengal 1840-1921’. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Volume 9 issue 2 p.132-160

¹⁸³ Bhattacharya N. (2011). The Logic of Location: Malaria Research in Colonial India, Darjeeling and Dooars, c.1900-30, *Medical History*, 2011 Apr; 55(2), pp.183–202. Retrieved from ncbi.nlm.gov. dated 23/4/23

¹⁸⁴Fischer H. Tiné & Michael Mann, (2004). *Colonialism as a Civilising Mission. Cultural Ideology in British India*. London: Anthem press, pp.95-115

other maladies.¹⁸⁵ Klein brought up the argument advanced by C. A. Bentley, a colonial public health officer, that railways caused ecological degradation and, as a result, malaria and morbidity.¹⁸⁶ Klein raised the absence of thought of environmental adverse effects during the development of railways in India due to possible two reasons 1. The profitable business mentality of the British people and 2. the negligence towards the Indian people as they were a 'dying race' and were 'physically inferior'.¹⁸⁷

Malaria has been linked to the introduction of railways, notably the construction of embankments and the close association of passengers while travelling, which has resulted in the disease spreading rapidly. The increased movement of people inevitably resulted in the spread of infectious diseases over large territories. It is known to have been transformed into an epidemic, causing significant death in Bengal. A series of malaria outbreaks had a significant impact on population change in Bengal in the second half of the nineteenth century. Environmental changes brought forth by development operations such as railway, road, and canal building exacerbated the disease environment. Whenever there was severe malaria predominance, it was most likely due to a circumstance known as 'tropical aggregation of labour,' which refers to regions where huge numbers of labourers lived and congregated, such as plantations or railway building sites. In these areas, 'non-immune immigration' and 'physiological poverty and hardship' boosted infection rates. This reason for increased malaria prevalence was assumed to be applicable to a broader range of places.¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

Bothway railways and newsprint of colonial Bengal intertwined as they both emerged in the same century. Newsprint found new fodder for publication, while railways gained a platform to

¹⁸⁵ Klein, I. (1972). 'Malaria and Mortality in Bengal 1840-1921'. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*. 9(2), pp. 132-60

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Klein, I. (1972). 'Malaria and Mortality in Bengal 1840-1921'. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*. 9(2), p.159

¹⁸⁸ Wakimura, K. (-), Health and Economic History: Lessons from the Study of Famines, Epidemics and Colonial Development in British India, 1871-1920. pg- 15 retrieved from <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Economic-History/Assets/Documents/Research/GEHN/GEHNConferences/conf2/Conf2-KWakimura.pdf>

disseminate notices and updates. Initially, publications like *Bengal Harkaru*, *The Statesman*, and others lauded the railways' necessity and amusement. Yet, as time elapsed, the narrative shifted. Print media began spotlighting mismanagement, accidents, and passenger hardships, advocating for change. From 1862 onwards, newspapers like *Sangbad Prabhakar*, *Prabashi* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* etc., echoed the demands of railway workers and criticised economic exploitation. They also shed light on environmental impacts, such as deforestation and waterway disruptions, highlighting the toll on public health. Amidst these revelations, railways faced blame for waterlogging and disease outbreaks, shaping a complex narrative of progress and peril in colonial Bengal.