

## CHAPTER 5

### Acceptance of Railways in Folklore Traditions

Folklore encompasses a wide spectrum of traditional customs, stories, beliefs, rhymes, practices etc. The railway network and train journeys over the period of time got integrated into the people's lives. Thus evolved what can be loosely identified as railway-lore. This chapter focuses only on how railways were perceived in the folklore traditions. To retain the flavour of local tradition, original Bengali terms representing folklore are used in the chapter. An attempt has been made to ensure that the meaning does not get lost in English translations. The folklore traditions has been discussed through: *loko chodas*, *loko sangeet*, *Baul gaan*, *dhandhan*, *Sanotali gaan*, *Sanotali bibaher gaan*. These were the expressions and experiences of both non-literate as well as literate societies. The railways have been used in the folklore traditions as either metaphors, analogies, or have been mentioned as a tool of modern technology and socio-economic progress.

#### 1. Folk *Chodas*

*Chodas* have reflected the changes brought about by the railways in colonial Bengal in several ways. With the introduction of railways, there was a significant increase in migration and travel in Bengal. This led to the emergence of new forms of popular culture, including songs and poems that celebrated the experience of travel and the railway itself. Many of these songs and poems were written in a rhyming structure, which made them easier to remember and pass down. Many Bengali *chodas* describe the experience of travelling in trains and the new opportunities it provided to the people. Here, the focus is laid on the traditional *chodas* which are popular in the present times. Children's *chodas* like *Akdum Bagdum Ghoradum Saje*, *Khoka Ghumalo Para Judalo*, and *Hattimatim Tim* are sung even today. However, it is known who or when these were composed. It goes without saying that the popular *chodas* have incorporated folk wisdom which was gained through decades of experience. The *chodas* also reflects centuries of conflict, racial unrest,

political unrest, national conflict, and presents social diversity.<sup>1</sup> The *chodas* that were composed around the building of railways in Bengal, not only convey the wonder of the railway but also highlight its varied benefits and drawbacks.

*Aikom baikom taratari*

*Jadu master shwasur bari*

*Rail kam jhoma jhom*

*Pa fichle alur dom.*<sup>2</sup>

*Aikom Baikom* hurry up

Jadu Sir is on the way to his in-law's house

The train is going creating chugging sound

You will be turned into potato-breath if slip your feet.<sup>3</sup>

The above is a very famous *choda* in Bengal. Every child in Bengal grows up listening to it. It talks about various aspects related to the introduction of railways in colonial Bengal and how it impacted the lives of people. The first line '*Aikom baikom taratari*' is about the speed of the train, which means that it is moving very fast. The second line '*Jadu master shwasur bari*' refers to a teacher who has gone to visit his father-in-law's house by train. This shows that people were now able to travel more easily and conveniently, even for personal reasons. The third line '*Rail kam jhoma jhom*' refers to the sound of the train. This line highlights the excitement and fascination that people had with the railways. The fourth and final line '*Pa fichle alur dom*' talks about a popular snack that's sold at train stations - *alur dom* (spicy potato dish) and *poori* (a type of fried bread). If anybody was not careful while boarding the train, her or his foot may slip and suffer an

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, A. S. (1998). *Annada Shankar Chada Samagra*. Kolkata: Bani Shilpo, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Note: This cherished childhood rhyme, passed down through the ages, has no known composer yet resonates with each generation.

<sup>3</sup> Note: This cherished childhood rhyme, passed down through the ages, has no known composer yet resonates with each generation.

injury and if not taken care the victim may be squashed like the Bengali dish *alur dom*. To make people aware of the hazards of the railway journey a booklet, *Bashpiya Ratharohidiger Prati Upadesh*<sup>4</sup> (Advice to the Railway Riders) by Akshay Kumar Datta was published in 1855. It contained advice for the train travellers to take care to avoid the hazards.<sup>5</sup>

The *chodas* besides focusing on the train travelling hazards also record diverse responses of the Indian public. Some *chodas*, for instance, record how people travelled from long distances to see the train; they gathered on the platform; and village girls worshipped the train etc. Previously, platforms were crowded with people. Then it became apparent that the village's girls had begun to worship the train in their homes. The following *choda* depicts how women travelled to the station, freshly showered, with their hair hanging, wearing a *motka* sari. They brought with them vermilion, oil, and fruit on a *kulo*. They stood in front of the engine as the train stopped at the station, and worshipped the train singing *choda*-

*Rail rail tomar paye dei tel*

*Railer kunthi kotodur?*

*Byathar paye tel sindur.*

*Eso rail bosho rail*

*Mukhe jol batasa*

*Chale daale rekho amar kachare bachare*

*Rail rail rail*

*Amar bhatare deo muri tel.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, pp. 147-52

<sup>5</sup> Dutta, A. (1776 Sakabda). *Directions for A Railway Traveller, Bashpiya Ratharohidiger Prati Upadesh*. Kolkata: Tattwabodhini Sabhar Jantralaye Mudrita.

<sup>6</sup> Chowdhury, R. (1988). 'Pratham Prahar', *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda publishers, p. 45-47

Train, I shall anoint your feet with oil

How far is your depot?

I shall smear oil and vermilion all over your painful feet

Train, if you come and sit down

I shall offer you water and sweets.

May you bless my children with sufficient rice and lentils

Train, you please

Give my husband enough puffed rice mixed with oil.

(Translation Mine)

The *choda* revealed the gratitude to the new transport system in Bengal expressed by women. Women used to sing and worship trains as they removed poverty and brought solvency to the lives of Bengali people. In the *choda*, the train was treated as a heavenly agency which gave people comfort when they travelled back home after a day of hard work. Women worshipped the train like a deity, by offering vermilion, oil, flowers and sweets to it, expecting that it will provide comfort and food to their children, husband and other family members.

The development of railways in Bengal, like in many other parts of the world, played a crucial role in creating new markets and transforming the economic landscape. Railways connected previously isolated regions and towns, facilitating the movement of people and goods. This connectivity opened up opportunities for businesses to expand their markets beyond their immediate vicinity. The construction of railway lines often led to the growth of towns and cities around railway stations. As people and businesses flocked to these areas due to improved connectivity, urban centres began to develop.<sup>7</sup> There are few *loko chodas* which find this availability exciting and

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<sup>7</sup> Rahaman, M. (2018). The Process of Urbanisation in Colonial India (1800-1947 A. D.). *International Journal of research and Analytical Reviews*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, July-Sep, 2018, pp. 33-35

captured in following lines:

*Ishishaner mishti gur*

*Shokher bagan golap ful.*<sup>8</sup>

Stations' jaggery, sweet delight,

Like the roses in a hobbyistic garden.

The above Bengali *choda* refers to the jaggery sold at railway stations with lovely gardens full of roses. The *choda* reflects the social changes brought about by the railways in colonial Bengal. Before the introduction of railways, transportation and communication in Bengal were slow and difficult. People did not have easy access to goods and services from different parts of the country. The railways changed this by providing fast and efficient transportation across long distances. One of the products that became easily accessible due to the railways was *mishti gur*, a type of sweet jaggery that was popular in Bengal. *Mishti gur* became a common commodity sold at railway stations, and the reference to it in the *choda* shows how the railways transformed the availability and accessibility of goods in Bengal. The second line of the *choda*, *shokher bagan golap ful*, refers to the pleasure gardens that became popular during the colonial period. These gardens were often designed to resemble European gardens, and were places where people could relax and enjoy the beauty of nature. The reference to rose flowers in these gardens suggests the influence of European aesthetics and the blending of different cultural elements in colonial Bengal.

### ***Dhandhan***

During colonial Bengal, the introduction and expansion of railways had a significant impact on various aspects of society, and this influence is sometimes reflected in riddles or *dhandhan*. *Dhandhan(s)* are traditional puzzles or word games that challenge the listener to guess a hidden meaning. *Dhandhan* related to railways during colonial Bengal serve as a reflection of the novelty,

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<sup>8</sup> Note: Since the dawn of light railways in Bengal, this catchy rhyme has travelled through the ages, captivating generations. Its composer remains a mystery, adding to its timeless allure.

impact, and the changes that railways brought to people's lives and how railways had become an integral part of the collective consciousness. In the context of colonial Bengal, *dhandhan* related to railways incorporated elements that showcased the mechanical wonder and transformative nature of this technology. For example the following *dhandhan*, found in Beldanga area of Nrisinghapur in Nadia district, is a riddle which describes what the train consumes.

*Bhat Khayna ruti khayna*

*Nongra kalo Pathar gele,*

*Jole agune juddha kore*

*Kato manushere niye chole.*<sup>9</sup>

It does not eat neither rice nor roti

Swallows only foul black stones.

It fights with water and fire

It runs carrying so many people in it.

(Translation Mine)

The *dhandhan* is to teach the children and others regarding the fuel consumed by the railway engine. It asks what it eats- not rice or *roti* but only eats dirty black coal as fuel. The *dhandhan* also explains the process through which the engine functions. It says that the coal is heated with fire and the heat boils the water to make steam which pushes the engine to run. The riddle also emphasises on the capabilities of the train to carry many passengers in its fold.

Another *Dhandhan* found around the Nrisinghapur, Nadia district, asks a similar question in the form of a *Dhandhan*. It says,

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<sup>9</sup> Barman, D. (2010). *Lokosahitye Railgaadi ba Kathakatay Rail, Katha*, Vol-8. September-October, 2010, p. 34

*Agun khay dhoan chade*

*Dhorfor korte korte chole*

*Bhai-boner sathe para porshi niye*

*Lohar dui parer upor gode.*<sup>10</sup>

It takes fire and emits smoke

Moves shaking itself

With brothers-sisters and neighbours

Runs on the two tracks made of iron.

(Translation Mine)

What takes fire and smoke and runs, shaking and bending their bodies. Here the *lohar dui par* (two rail tracks) means iron path. With many carriages, wheels, sleepers the train overwhelmed people's minds. Its impact was so deep rooted that it has earned a permanent presence in local *Dhandhan*.

Another *dhandhan*, found in the Rajbadi area of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) refers to the train as a tree.

*Ek gach tan dile*

*Sob gach node*

*Kana pakhi dak dile*

*Kuk kuk kore.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barman, D. (2010). *Lokosahitye Railgaadi ba Kathakatay Rail, Katha*, Vol-8. September-October, 2010. p. 33

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 31

If one branch is pulled

The entire tree shakes

When the blind bird chirps,

It sounds like '*Kuk kuk*'.

(Translation mine)

In the aforementioned *dhandhan*, the tree and *kana pakhi* is compared with trains which appear to be blind like the bird. When the engine starts and runs automatically, one compartment after another moves. Railway locomotives make recognisable whistles and sounds (here represented as *kuk kuk*), which were quite distinctive and simple for people to recognise from a very early point. The people of Bengal were so awestruck by the technical marvel that it inspired a *Dhandhan*.

*Ghat pichla kusum ful*

*Keu dakche bahu dur*

*Dakche boro shabdo koirā*

*Manush rakhche khara koirā.*<sup>12</sup>

The slippery shore is turned into a flower

Someone calls from a distant place

So loudly,

Keeping the people upward.

(Translation Mine)

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<sup>12</sup>Barman, D. (2010). *Lokosahitye Railgaadi ba Kathakatay Rail, Katha*, Vol-8. September-October, 2010, p. 31-32

The above *Dhandhan*, which was discovered from Daulatia, in the Rajbadi area (now in Bangladesh), illustrates the critical function that railways play in the movement of people and products. Here, the role of railways as a means of transportation and a thread connecting distant locations is illustrated. The sound of the train also encouraged people to go forward quickly. The last statement illustrates the amazing technique of carrying people while they are standing in it, while people had to sit in earlier modes of transport.

Another *Dhandhan* found in west Midnapore expresses the huge carrying capacity of the train.

*Khadagpure dekhe Ali*

*Rail batay bagh boseche,*

*E baghe ki manush khay*

*Dekhlo sabha boseche.*<sup>13</sup>

Ali observes at Kharagpur

Tiger is sitting on the rail track,

This tiger does not eat human flesh?

He saw a public assembly.

(Translation Mine)

Here Ali, a person who saw something huge which looked like a tiger on the railway track of Khadagpur (*Khadagpure dekhe Ali Rail batay bagh boseche*), devoured scores of people together! But once you enter into it, behold ! one can witness a public assembly (*dekhlo sabha boseche*). The *Dhandhan* portrays the huge capacity of the train, which resembles a hungry tiger.

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<sup>13</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p. 118

## ***Loko Sangeet***

*Loko sangeet* has always been a significant part of Bengali folklore. With the arrival of railways, *anchalik loko sangeet* with the new theme emerged, celebrating the wonder and excitement of train travel. These often described the experience of taking a train, the modernity it represented, and the sense of adventure associated with it. They also reflected the changes in daily life brought about by the railways. By examining folk cultures at two distinct levels, one representing tribal societies (*Sanotali gaan*) and the other rural Bengal (*anchalik lok sangeet*). For the purposes of the thesis, two forms have been picked up - *Sanotali gaan* and other *anchalik sangeet*.

### ***Sanotali Gaan***

The depiction of railways in songs of tribal communities in colonial Bengal can provide valuable insights into how these communities perceived and experienced the introduction of railways. *Sanotali gaan* often reflected a sense of curiosity and wonder about the arrival of railways. The sight of trains, with their powerful engines and fast-moving carriages, was a novel and awe-inspiring experience for many tribal individuals. Railways were seen as a symbol of modernity and progress. Tribal songs depicted railways as a sign of the changing times, marking the transition from traditional modes of transportation to the new and advanced technology represented by trains.

The impact of railways on the tribal communities of colonial Bengal was complex and multifaceted. Before and during colonial rule, the tribals of the Bengal Presidency were mainly forest dwellers and hunters and gatherers by profession. The construction of railway lines sometimes required the acquisition of land, which led to the displacement of tribal communities from their ancestral lands. The construction and operation of railways increased the demand for natural resources like timber, which led to overexploitation of forests in tribal areas. Though the building of railways affected the tribals of Bengal in many ways, railways created job opportunities for tribal people as labourers, track maintainers, and in other related roles. Many tribal individuals found employment with the railways, which provided a source of income for their families. A few tribal groups became exposed to the economic structure of the main trends in Bengali society. The building of railways required a large number of labourers, and the upper-class people of Bengal were least interested in coming into contact with foreigners, so the requirement was met by the

low-wage tribal people. Thus, in many ways, the building of railways affected the economy and socio-cultural structure of the tribal people of Bengal.

*Seday tahe kana yug Da tahe kana*

*Seday udoun gaadi bang tahe kana.*

*Naha: da ngelmere dahar chatan, sagad*

*Gaadi line chetan/Motor gaadi chodte chala:*

*O udaun gaadi,*

*Koy tema hata: hadi:*

*Koler kol gaadi ladao ena da.<sup>14</sup>*

A long time ago it was a golden day

There were no jet aeroplanes in the past.

See now on the roads

Motor cars and trains on the rail lines

Aeroplanes are flying in the sky

Neck hurts when looking up

Engine cars have also started.

*(Translation Mine)*

Aforementioned *Sanotali bibaha gaan* depicts the shift in transportation methods from a traditional era to a more dynamic and modern one. In the past, there were no trains, aeroplanes or motor cars,

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<sup>14</sup> Paul, M. (2006). *Saontal Somajer Bibaha O Biyer Gan*. collected by Dr. Mohon Pal, Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, p.191

but as time progressed, motor cars began to traverse the roads, trains ran on the railways, and aircraft soared through the skies.

*Ye ful, dela ful*

*Rel gadeere dejo: ful*

*Dumko jela ngelo*

*Rel gadeere bang dejo:*

*Dumko jela bang ngelo*

*Dumko jela had da ale dale.<sup>15</sup>*

O my friend, come friend

We do get in the train.

To go to Dumko district.

If we do not get in the train.

We shall not be able to go there.

People of Dumko district are very helpless.

(Translation Mine)

The first line of the aforementioned *Sanotali gaan* means "Oh friend, come on friend." This part of the song is an invitation to a friend, urging them to come along. It suggests a sense of excitement or a desire to share an experience with someone close to watch the new faster transport system. The second and third lines means 'I will take the train to see Dumka district' indicates that the

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<sup>15</sup> Paul, M. (2006). *Saontal Somajer Bibaha O Biyer Gan*. Collected by Dr. Mohon Pal, Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, pp.195-96

speaker intends to travel to Dumka district by train. Dumka district is the destination, and the train is the chosen mode of transportation to get there. The last few lines indicate a contradictory opinion where the narrator shows reluctance to travel to Dumka district. The reason given in the *gaan* is that the people of the Dumka were helpless. The use of the word 'helpless' suggests restive situation or issue in Dumka district that requires attention or assistance which may refer the insurrection of Dumka, happened during 1855-55 against both land lords and the British.<sup>16</sup> The train was such a medium of communication by which people of one region could communicate with the problems of other regions.

When the railway line was first opened, the longing and joy of the people from different regions of Bengal to see and take the train had been expressed in many *bibaha gaan* and other *loko sangeet*. The following *gaan* reflects railways as wonder and draws the attention of the people towards something that they had not seen before. The train in a sense becomes a symbol of modernity or change.

*Sadak sadak tema bus gaadi chala: kan*

*Layen layen tema relgaadi*

*Sadak em parmare*

*Gaadi koygame.*

*Lyen em parmare*

*Relgaadi koygame*

*Hane ngela kane ale odah:*<sup>17</sup>

The buses go through the road

The trains go along the rail lines

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<sup>16</sup> Datta, K. (1940). *The Santal Insurrection, 1955-57*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, pp. 24-37

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. P. 205

While walking on the roads

We can see the moving vehicles

While walking along the railway lines

We can see the passing trains

Our houses are visible over there.

(Translation Mine)

First two lines: ‘Along the roads, the bus is going/ Along the railway line, the train is moving’ - highlight the increased mobility and connectivity brought about by railways and other modes of transportation like buses in Bengal. The presence of buses and trains on the road and railway lines signifies that people in Bengal had a greater access to travel options. The mention of buses and trains could be seen as symbols of modernization and progress. The song suggests that these modern modes of transportation became an integral part of daily life in Bengal, signifying progress and development. ‘While walking on the road, see the passing cars/ while walking on the railway line, see the passing train’ - are to encourage people to take notice of the vehicles and trains when they are out and about. This implies that railways and transportation had become a source of interest and curiosity for the people. It reflects how railways became a part of the daily landscape and were worth observing and appreciating. The last line, that looks like our house (*Hane ngela kane ale odah*/Our houses are visible over there.), suggests that the introduction of railways bridges the distance gap between the working place or relative's house and home which prior to the introduction of railways was not there.

### ***Anchalik Loko Sangeet***

When the train started running from Howrah to Hooghly in August 1854, an unprecedented frenzy spread among the people. The English newspaper *Citizen* even petitioned the government to

declare the day as a public holiday.<sup>18</sup> From the very beginning, railways gained a lot of popularity among the public of Bengal. The praise for this invention and the inventor had been echoed in the voices of the street singers. *Friend of India*, on 31st August, 1854 published a song- “Run run and behold the Saheb’s wisdom untold has made a road of rails.”<sup>19</sup> Railways were a constant theme in singing traditions at that time. The street singers used to perform songs on the train and railway stations. These were appealing and enjoyable for the passengers. This above mentioned line was sung by a street singer on Srirampore railway station. The editor of the *Friend of India* was apparently travelling in the train where he heard someone sing the song in Bengali. He liked the song so much that he translated and published it in the said newspaper on 31st August, 1854.<sup>20</sup>

When railways were first introduced in Bengal, its popularity reached even among people from far-flung regions.

*Rail gaadi kein sundar*

*Chalo deikhe jabo*

*Bhitare to aig pani*

*Upore to Lohalati*

*Hawake saman chale*

*Lage nadhar Shyam.*<sup>21</sup>

How beautiful the train is!

Lets go to see it

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<sup>18</sup> Datta, A. K.(2008). *Akshay Kumar Datta Rachana Sangraha*. First published, 2008 , Kolkata: Pashchim Banga Bangla Academy, p.48

<sup>19</sup> The Editor, *Friend of India*, 31st August, 1854

<sup>20</sup> Datta, A. K.(2008). *Akshay Kumar Datta Rachana Sangraha*. First published, 2008 , Kolkata: Pashchim Banga Bangla Academy, p.50

<sup>21</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p.116

Fire and water remain inside

Above is the iron structure

It runs at the speed of air

Looks like Lord Krishna.

(Translation Mine)

Above mentioned song is popular amongst the porters of tea gardens of Assam. The song expresses the curiosity about the train among the porters of the tea estates of Assam. The coolies/porters encouraged each other to see the train as a new fabulous mode of communication. The song expresses wonder about the technique of movement of the train. The song reveals that the train is made of iron and uses fire and water to create its driving force inside. He compared the speed of his movement to the speed of the wind. He also equated the train with Lord Krishna.

Another *anchalik loko sangeet*, known as *Gambhira*, popular mostly in districts of northern Bengal, depicts the railways as the symbol of modernism in Bengal -

*Chol Tepir maa, Humra du'jhna*

*Ghurya ashi Kolkatay*

*Rail gaadite choidhya jabo dodya*

*Sadh chila mone badhai.*

*Chol Tepir maa...*

*Panta bhate nun piyas diya*

*Banhya le tui gamchate liya*

*Ore, path bipathe, bhin dyashete*

*Ki khabi bhukher jwalay.*

*Chol tepir ma ...*

*Rasta diya chole teram-gaadi*

*Engine o nai dhuan o nai tari*

*Khali tikki diya tare tare*

*Kyamun korya agay pachay.*

*Chol Tepir maa....*

*Othe, marad maiyar kunui tafat nai,*

*Helte dulte ek e songe jay,*

*Tokeo korbo modan, haler fyashan,*

*Hat dhorya khabo Haoway.*

*Chal Tepir ma.....<sup>22</sup>*

O Tepi's mother, let we the couple

Go to visit Kolkata.

Riding by train so quickly

The desire was since long past.

Let's go Tepi's mother....

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The tram cars run on roads

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<sup>22</sup> Chowdhury, A. (2008). *Uttarbonge Mati Manusher Gaan*. Kolkata:Loko Sanskriti O Adivasi Sanskriti kendra, Tathya o Sanskriti Bibhag, Pashchim Bango Bibhag, p. 411

Without any engine and smoke out of them,

With only tufts of wires

They go forward and backward.

Let's go Tepi's mother....

There is no discrimination between male and female at all,

Both the sexes together wanders about comfortably.

I shall make you also modern and up to date

We'll hold each other's hands and eat together in the open air.

(Translation Mine)

The introduction of trains, buses and trams in Bengal created palpable excitement amongst the masses. People from remote areas of Bengal also yearned to get a taste of the new transportation system. The *loko sangeet* is about a man telling his wife to travel along with him to Calcutta to see the tram. Tram, here became the symbol of modernity. It appears that the couple was used to travelling by train and had become accustomed to it. For the man, the tram appeared to be more fascinating because it seemingly had no engine and did not emit any smoke. Since the tram tilted sideways, the man expresses his thrill at being able to hold his wife's hand in public. Holding hands by a couple was considered to be a symbol of modernity

*Jhik jhik, jhik jhik chole railgaadi*

*Ete chode ebar ami pouche jabo bari*

*Railgaadi railgaadi chole enke benke*

*Banshi bajao jore jore*

*Ektu theke theke*

*Niye jabo songe kore misti shato hadi*

*Jhik jhik, jhik jhik chole rail gaadi.*

*Sobai mile moja kore mamar badi jabo*

*Sekhan giye chanachur ar tok jhal achar khabo.*

*Ragaragi korle sobai niye nebo adi*

*Jhik jhik, jhik jhik chole rail gaadi.* <sup>23/</sup>

Train runs producing sound like *jhik jhik jhik jhik*

Now I can reach home by train.

The trains move on zigzag ways

The whistles blow loudly

After every while

I shall take hundreds of sweet pots with me

Train runs producing sound like *jhik jhik jhik jhik*

We all together shall go to my maternal uncle's home funnily

And eat salted gram and prickle of sour and chilli-taste

If you do unpleasant things I shall be eavesdropping

Train runs producing sound like *jhik jhik jhik jhik*

(Translation Mine)

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<sup>23</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p. 117

The aforementioned song, which portrays the ease and convenience of living made possible by the railways, may be heard in Charborat of Rajbari, which is currently in Bangladesh. This illustrates the train's motion pattern, which consists of zigzagging while loudly whistling following brief stops. Before the train arrived, getting to a relative's house required too much labour and time; yet, now that the train has arrived, getting to the maternal uncle's house became easy, comfortable and less stressful. *Niye jabo songe kore misti shato hadi* - the train made it possible to carry along loads of bags and edible items.

Another song found in Khankapur of Rajbari which has been composed by a woman, conveys that due to the railway job of her uncle, she had hopes to receive a saree with pleats. Earlier in Bengal women in villages used to wear saree that were short in length hence could not have flaring pleats. But the railways have made better garments within reach for the village dwellers.

*Amgache jholti polti*

*Doyal pokshi nache*

*Amar mama chakri kore Faridpurer raile*

*Taka chaina poysa chaina*

*Chaine ekta saree*

*Emon saree dicche mama*

*Kuchi dite pari.*<sup>24</sup>

In the mango tree

The magpie-robin bird is dancing joyfully

My maternal uncle works in Faridpur Railway

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<sup>24</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata:Gangchil, p. 117

I do not want money

I need not any saree

My uncle is giving such a saree

With which I can do pleats.

(Translation Mine)

Here, the maternal uncle got employment with the railways, and his salary led his family to lead an affluent lifestyle, as well allowing him to meet the material requirements of other relatives. Here the composer demands an exceptional saree from her maternal uncle as he is an employee of a railway company.

The integration of railways into emotions and social life has been reflected in many *loko sangeet* of Bengal. A *gaan* sung in Nrisinghapur of Nadia district shows a *boudi (bhabhi)* taunting her *nanad* (sister-in law) regarding her husband's appearance when he arrives after travelling in the train.

*Ay nanadi ay dekhe jash e*

*Jamai ghore ashiche railgaadite chaipe*

*O tora dekhe jash e .*

*Chul hoyeche ulujhulu, mukh giyeche shukiye*

*Rail gaadite cheipe*

*O nanadi tora dekhe jash e.*<sup>25</sup>

Oh my sister-in-law, please come and see

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<sup>25</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata:Gangchil, p. 118

Your husband is coming by train

Oh, all come and see

Hair gets untidy and face gets dry

due to travelling by train

Oh sister-in-law, please come and see.

(Translation Mine)

The *gaan* describes that since the *jamai* got off the train, his expression is bewildered. She mockingly asks her sister-in-law to take care of his dishevelled hair and dry face.

Railways became a part of everyday affairs for Bengali people. In the *loko sangeet* from the Satki district mentioned below, a groom's family lays conditions on the bride's family to provide a Benarasi saree to the *nanad*. If the Benarasi saree was not given the *bor jatri* (groom side) would take a train back home without the bride. The emphasis here was laid on Benarasi saree. They did not emphasise money as a part of dowry but insisted that their daughter must be honoured with the customary gift.

*Taka chaina poysa chaina*

*Laigbe Benarasi sari.*

*Train koire niye jabo, barke tumar bari!*

*Monda mithai na milbe to*

*Diye dubo adi*

*Nanad pyatari na dibito borke niye jabo teraine kori<sup>26</sup>.*

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<sup>26</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, pp. 119-120

I don't want any rupee or paise

I need only *Benarasi saree*

I shall take away the bride to your home by train

If sweets etc., are not available

I will vie with you

If you don't give a gift to your sister-in-law I shall take away your husband by train

(Translation Mine)

Not only did the train speed up with joy or pride, but sorrow was also shared equally as evidenced in various *anchalik loko sangeet*. The following song expresses the farewell of a brother by train in which the other sister/brother is crying by saying:

*Ekta gaadi duto gaadi teente gaadire*

*Kon gaadite chepe geli dada jante narlan re*

*Ekta bogi duto bogi tinte bogire*

*Kon bogite chepe geli dada jante narlamra<sup>27</sup>*

Three trains passed by one by one

Brother, I could not notice in which train you rode

Three coaches passed by one by one

Brother, I could not find out in which coach you rode

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<sup>27</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p.117

The *gaan*'s lyrics seem to describe a sensation of distance or separation between siblings—who are attempting to get back in touch or get together. The reference to several trains and coaches alludes to a voyage or trip component. It suggests doubt and annoyance at not being able to find the individual when questions like "which train did you ride?" and "in which coach did you ride, my brother" are asked repeatedly. The speaker is expressing a wish to know where the other person has gone and what experiences they have had, and the trains and coaches might be metaphorically representing many life pathways or options.

A Tusu *gaan* prevalent in Medinipur and Purulia district also echo the pain of separation from their loved ones-

*Raja jay maa rail sadake*

*Rani kande mahale.*

*Fir fir ohe Raja,*

*Rani kandche mahale.*

*Keno je kanchish Rani*

*Bhangamahal bhitare.....*<sup>28</sup>

Oh mother, the King is going by railway

The queen is crying in the palace

Oh King, please return

The queen is crying inside the palace

I know why the queen is crying

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<sup>28</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata:Gangchil, pp. 117-18

Inside the deserted palace....

(Translation Mine)

This *loko sangeet* is a narrative about separation of king and a queen. The king travels by train, perhaps, to see different lands, leaving his queen behind. Despite appeals made the king does not look back or return.

*Bhalo kore paronete kalapere dhuti*

*Jama gay shobha paye pore moja juti*

.....

*Ginnider byaboharer karon jaha chai*

*Shighra kore kine dore dar koren nai.....*

.....<sup>29</sup>

Well dressed in a dhoti with black border

Body is adorned with cloths and feet with socks and shoes

.....

Whatever needed for the use of wives

They buy all those things without any bargaining

.....

( Translation Mine)

In this section, assimilation, and acceptance of railways within the cultural setting and everyday

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<sup>29</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, pp. 100-01

life is visible at all levels of the society in the urban areas, in rural regions, as well as in the societies living in fringe areas.

***Bengali Adhyatmik Sangeet:***

The railways evoked a in the minds of poets, saints and musicians. In pre mediaeval and mediaeval and mediaeval literature, the human body has been compared to other systems of travel such as a chariot or a boat (...*Ajob koke baniyeche tori (boat)..tori paban bhore apni chole/kiba tar karikuri..*).<sup>30</sup> After the introduction of railways the train and rail lines began to be used as a metaphor in the context of spiritual matters, corporeality, soul-spirit relationship etc. For example, in the songs of Baul saints, the train, the railway line, and its mechanism are used as metaphors in various ways. Few such Baul *gaan* have been given here:

*Jacche Gour premer railgaadi*

*Tora dekshe (premer premik jato) tora dekshe,*

*Ay taratari.*

*Uddharer ache jato kol, sokol koler sera e kol*

*Agni kole dicche tule jol-udche dhonga*

*Ghurche boma (abar) hocche koler hudohudi*

*Guard hoyechen nitai amar,*

*Shri Advaita engineer ebar bhobe*

*Bhabna kire ar- mukhe Hari Hai,*

*Gourhari, kocchen ticket mastari.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Chakraborty, S. (Ed.).(1990). *Bangla Dehatatmer Gaan*. Kolikata: Pragya, p. 47

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. p. 115

The rail carriage named 'the love of *Gaurango*' is running

Come and see all the lovers of that

Please come hurry.

It is the best salviour out of all the rescuing engines

Water is coming out from the fire-driven engine in the form of vapour

The bomb is rotating, the engine is jostling

*Nityananda* is the guard.

*Shri Advaita* is the engineer

You have nothing to worry about- please chant '*Hari Hari*'

*Sri Gauranga Mahaprabhu* is checking the tickets.

(Translation Mine)

In this aforementioned *gaan* religious tradition of *Goudiya Vaishnava* community has been expressed using the train as a spiritual path toward attainment of salvation. In the Bengali Vaishnava cult, Shrichaitanya Deva is the incarnation of Radha and Krishna together in *Kali yuga*. Shri Nityananda Mahaprabhu is the incarnation of Balaram. Shri Chaitanya Deva (1486-1634) was the founder of the Vaishnava movement in eastern part of India and preached the holy chanting of Lord Krishna-*Hare Krisna maha* mantra among all people, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. He is known as Gouranga Mahaprabhu or Goura. He propagated the true love for God and humans as well. So in the *gaan*, the train has been spiritually illustrated as a metaphor as a train of love for God. Here it is said-The train of love of Goura is running away (*Jacche Gour premer railgaadi*). This is the best machine out of all the machines (ways) of emancipation (*Uddharer ache jato kol, sokol koler sera e kol*). Smoke is coming out of the fire engine of that machine where water is provided (*Agni kole dicche tule jol-udche dhonga*). Shri Nityananda Mahaprabhu is the guard of this train and Shri Advaita Mahaprabhu is the engineer of this machine.

Sri Gauranga Mahaprabhu is checking the ticket to get salvation.

Another famous *gaan*, which demonstrated the way of spiritual life of Vaishnava sect in which train has been referred as vehicle of emancipation, is as follows-

*Chode Engrejer gaadite tor proyojon*

*Shonre abodh mon, Sree gurur padapadma gaadir age*

*Tuccha koler gaadi kothey lage, Shighra chado anurage*

*Jabe nitya Vrindavan.*

*Gaadir pratham clashe Harinamdui akshar, Jadi eccha kore,*

*Agun pani naiko dodi gaadite*

*Omni gaadi chole haowate*

*Gaadi godeche analo kal, jole sthole omni chole,*

*Choudikete apni chole, line nai tar nirupan.*

*Gaadir dwitiya clasher kotha boli shono,*

*Rekhe shikshagurur pode mati, grahan karo kam gayitri*

*Mone prane oikya kore sadhana*

*Ache gaadir bhitor char rong poda*

*Passenger tar pan je dhora,*

*Pitambar tar songe pora, gaadi chalay sarbokshan.*

*Gaadir tritiya clashe prakriti ashroy*

*Gaadir mukh royeche tala anta,*

.....  
*Amar gonsai guruchand bole, choudha bhuban ekti kole*

*Dui chakate gaadi chole chalay bose mon paban.*<sup>32</sup>

You need to avail the transport of British-train

Listen my stupid mind, as compared to the train of lotus feet of the *guru*

Anything else is trivial, ride fast on it with love

You will reach *Vrindavan* daily.

The two-syllable word '*Hari*' is in the first class, if you desire so

No need of fire and water by this train

This train is run with air

The carriage (human body) made by eternal time, runs on land and water equally.

It runs automatically all around, there is no such visible line

Listen, I am telling about the second class of the train

Praying to the lotus-feet of the pedagogue, accept the wish of enlightenment

Pursue him conjoining mind and soul

There are four burnt colours inside the car.

The true passengers only can catch Him.

He is dressed in yellow and drives the carriage non-stop.

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<sup>32</sup> Bhattacharya, A. (Compilation) (1967). *Bangiya Lok Sangeet Ratnakar*, Vol-IV. Kolkata: A Mukherjee and Company Private Limited, p.1819

The third class of the train is the shelter of nature.

The door of the train is locked

.....

My spiritual teacher says, all the fourteen worlds are driven by that single engine.

The carriage runs on two wheels and is driven by mind alias air.

(Translation Mine)

The above mentioned *gaan* uses the metaphor of a train journey to convey spiritual teachings and philosophical concepts. Here the composer is trying to say, we need not take the train made by the British engineer, our body is the best carriage for our spiritual journey. The song emphasises focused practice, transcendental aspect of the spiritual journey, and commitment through the metaphor of a train. The journey is shown as an ageless and instinctive process, with the different classes of the train signifying distinct facets of the route to attain the goal of emancipation.

‘Baul’ sect of Bengal used the train as reference to explain spiritual physiology (*sahajiya tantrism/* a lineage, mixed up of *Tantrism* and *Buddhist Sahajaiya tradition*).

*Deho mon koler gaadi*

*Byapar kiba paripati*

*Mul hote line khule*

*Sat station ghati ghati*

*Sanketik dandamule,*

*Kundalini<sup>33</sup> mukh tule*

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<sup>33</sup> In Hindu religion Kundalini is a form of divine feminine energy (or Shakti) believed to be located at the base of the spine

*Susumnate rail boseche*

*Tar dupashe tar choleche*

*Ida pingala ei duti.*

*Kripabashpa diya chadi*

*Sriguru chalan gaadi.*

*Hansa: hansa rab chadi*

*Chole gaadi chutochuti.*

*Shantiniketan hote*

*Jibatma choden tate*

*Chole jan anandete*

*Tyaje bhober khatakhati<sup>34</sup>.*

The body and mind together resembles an engine-carriage (train)

The whole system is well constructed

The line after emerging from the root

Routes through seven stations (seven chakras)

At symbolic *dandamuls* (pelvic plexus),

*Kundalini Ckakra* is facing upward

The *Shusumna* is acting as rails

---

<sup>34</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2012). *Samaj Chitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p. 114

Wires go on either side of it

These are *Ida* and *Pingala* <sup>35</sup>

Emerging the steam of blessings

The almighty *guru* drives the carriage

Making sound resembling *hansa hansa*

The train moves on.

From the place of peace

The universal soul boards on it

Goes on with joy

Being escaped from the donkeywork of this earth.

(Translation Mine)

The *gaan* describes the body and mind as train carriages suggesting that they are vehicles for the journey of life, akin to a train moving along a track. Here seven stations represent the seven *chakras*, which are energy centres in the body. Each station signify a different stage or aspect of the spiritual journey. Through the awakening of this supreme power, one can strengthen and balance *chakras*, and foster physical prowess and calmness, enhance spiritual experiences, connect with universal consciousness etc. Overall the train symbolises the disciplined path and the stops indicate phases of spiritual growth, and the supervision of a spiritual teacher acts as a transformational force. Overall, the *gaan* seems to be a symbolic journey of spiritual awakening, where the escape from earthly labour implies a happy and transcending release.

Another *kobi gaan* (Light song in the form of questions- answers) sung by Roopchand Pakshi is a

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<sup>35</sup> *Ida* and *Pingla* are two cords, in addition to *Shushumna*, on either side of the spine, according to Indian Yoga Shastra. *Ida* denotes the lunar energies, whereas *Pingla* denotes sun energy.

spiritual song, which compared the human body with the machine of train-

*Manush chole koler bole*

*Panchabhut boroi majbut, ghereche sahasra dole. Ore bhai*

*Ei deha machine iha bhai boroi probin*

*Ingraj, Chin, French, Markin sobai har manilo,*

*Mori ki shilpo vidya, korechen mahavidya-*

*Kolti tin hat, ete hoy trijagat mat.*

.....<sup>36</sup>

The human being is moved by the power of engines

Strong five elements have surrounded us in thousand groups, oh dears!

This body is also an engine, it is very much antique

British, Chinese, French, American- all have surrendered

What an artistic technique, created by supreme knowledge-

That three hand long engine has conquered all the three universes

.....

(Translation Mine)

All through the song the body is symbolised as a machine which is very complex and powerful. Train is the symbol of mechanical power in this world but the human body is more powerful than the machine which triumph over three worlds.

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<sup>36</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2012). *Samaj Chitre Bharatiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p. 115

### 3.4 Paribesh Dushan in Loko Sangeet

The ecological effects of railways on the environment and forests have been studied by historians like Richard Hugh Grove, Tucker, Ramchandra Guha, and Madhav Gadgil as part of the larger phenomena of deforestation since the second of the 18th century.<sup>37</sup> Deforestation was aptly ascribed to the continuous timber demand for railway track sleepers; firewood as fuel for locomotives; and the endless clearing of bushes and other green fields to make room for the railway lines. More than that, the construction of railways affected the way of life of communities that relied for generations on forests and its resources. *Loko sangeet* addressed how Bengal's environment was impacted by railways.

When the South East Rail Lines of the B N R company was being constructed by clearing a path through the forests of south western region of Bengal, the original inhabitants of that area lamented the loss of trees in the following *anchalik loko sangeet*, *Tusu* -

*Kon digger le ailo saheb*

*Ailore dalan bhainge.*

*Bon jangal kaite kuite railgaadi bujai kore*

*Rele dhunga ure.*<sup>38</sup>

From which side the British come?

They came damaging the wall

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<sup>37</sup> Grove, R. H. (1995). *Green imperialism; colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600–1860*. Cambridge University Press, First edition; Tucker, R. P. (2012). *A Forest History of India*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd; Gudgil, M., & Guha, R. (1992). *The Fissured Land and Ecological History of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press

<sup>38</sup> Ghosal, C. (2005). *Tusur Katha..* Kolkata: Gita Printers, p. 56

Cutting and plucking the jungles and forests, fetching so many rail-networks

Smoke emerges of the train.

(Translation Mine)

Here, the question is raised, where did the British people come?. They laid extensive railway lines throughout Bengal by clearing the thick forests, trees and shrubs, signifying deforestation in colonial Bengal. The penultimate stanza of the song included a picture of smoke-emitting trains to further illustrate the air pollution. Similar illustrative *loko sangeet* have been found in other regions of the south-western Bengal especially in Midnapur and Purulia. For example:

*Malgaadi bujai bhari go*

*Tar damake bhuin kanpe.*

*Lakkho moner upor bujhai*

*Kontase ticket kate.*

*Kena dhunga ude.*

*Oi dhungate jagater paysa lute*

*Gur gur shobde rail gaadi kole chole.*<sup>39</sup>

The goods train is loaded heavily

The land is trembling with its pride

It is loaded with lacs of maunds

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<sup>39</sup> Ghosal, C. (2005). *Tusur Katha*. Kolkata: Gita Printers p. 57

Buy tickets sounding kontas

Smoke is being emerged

That smoke loots the money of the world

The train runs with engine generating a sound resembling gur gur.

(Translation Mine)

The earth trembles in dread of the goods train's prowess as it hauls such massive amounts of weight. The emphasis on the first three lines of the above mentioned *loko sangeet* highlights how goods trains have a huge capacity to transport incredibly large freight. The notion that their immense power could shake the very earth underscores the extensive nature of the operation, suggesting the indispensable role these trains played in the transportation of commodities and goods. However, it also shows Indian railways became tentacles of economic exploitation. This is supported by theories of Dada Bhai Naoroji and other nationalist historians, which are examined briefly in chapter 3. The final three lines highlight the negative effects that trains had on the environment and the economy. The mention of smoke could be referred to as a shadow against clear blue skies. Another *loko sangeet* prevalent in Haripur, Nadia demonstrates that the train noises disturbed the sleep patterns of the residents along the railway lines.

*Railer dumdumani*

*Rateo ghum dhorena jadumoni,*

*Railer dumdumani....*

.....<sup>40</sup>

Due to *dumdum* sound of the train

I can not sleep at night, oh my darling

---

<sup>40</sup> Chowdhury, P. (2016). *Samajchitre Bhartiya Rail*. Kolkata: Gangchil, p. 118

The *dumdum* sound is not so good.

.....

(Translation Mine)

The following poem shows the plight of a Bengali man who laments to his wife how the passing train poses a threat to the lives of those who dwell along the railway lines.

*Bajlo banshi, chal, nagari rail dekhe ashi*

*Railer dhare bari go jader, tara poreche fere*<sup>41</sup>

The whistle of train blew, beloved, let's see the train

The homes situated near the train lines are in danger

(Translation Mine)

## Conclusion

As railways occupied a special place in the various genres of folk culture. Impact of railways on socio-cultural, economic and ecology of Bengal have been studied through the lenses of those genres especially, *loko chodas*, *dhandhan*, *loko sangeet* etc. The Bengalis responded to railways in a variety of ways, demonstrating their enthusiasm, reverence, faith and at times even dread or fear in its ability to change the nation. Railways brought about a transformation in society and culture, which was reflected in all of these genres. Via the prism of musical renditions, the train has been shown as an medium of transportation that aided in India's modernisation and has also been simlized with a spiritual journey to attain *moksha*. Railways made life easier and better for the people of Bengal by bringing about new employment opportunities; connecting regions; transporting humans, materials, and ideas, which facilitated other social improvements. The *loko chodas* and *loko Sangeet* have not hesitated to voice the adverse effects of railways such as-

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<sup>41</sup> Bhattacharya, A. (Compilation). (1967). *Bangiya Loko Sangeet Ratnakar. Vol-iv*. Kolkata: A Mukherjee and Company Private Limited, p. 38

economic exploitation, haziness of the previously clear blue skies, sleep deprivation by the jarring sounds of the train, and the loss of forests that were sojourns of peaceful and spiritual resort.