

## Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India

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**Reviewer:** Aparajita Mukhopadhyay

Ritika Prasad's volume *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* is a refreshingly new addition to the historiography of colonial Indian railways. It is indeed, as the author claims in the introduction, a story of 'how railway travel, technology and infrastructure became palpably present in the everyday lives of Indians' (p. 2). The volume successfully demonstrates the ways in which colonial Indian railways became enmeshed with everyday lived experience of millions of Indians from the mid-19th century onwards, and how Indians responded to this presence by adapting as well as challenging the quintessential 'tool of the empire'. More importantly, Prasad's volume also makes a vital and wider point of illustrating how the everyday Indian responses to this new technological presence in their lives 'materially shaped India's history' (p. 3).

The focus of Prasad's work, namely the everyday workings of the colonial Indian railway and its impact on the history of India as evidenced through the lives of Indians who used the railway network extensively, represents a historiographical departure. Broadly speaking, until recently our knowledge of the workings of the colonial Indian railways was mostly confined to its impact on Indian economy. Penetrating analyses by John Hurd, Daniel Thorner, Ian Derbyshire, Robert Varady and others have since long enriched our understanding of how an expansive railway network shaped various facets of colonial Indian economy. Subsequently, Ian Kerr added his excellent and pioneering contributions on railway construction labour and the managerial aspects of controlling a vast, diverse and circulating labour force in colonial India. In this context, railway labour, both construction and operational, also received a fair share of scholarly scrutiny highlighting the myriad ways in which its actions can be interpreted as both ideologically anti-colonial and informed by notions of collective working class identity and welfare.

Prasad's work, however, deviates from this scholarship. Her book represents a wider shift in Indian railway historiography that in recent years has interpreted the role of colonial Indian railways as a social, cultural and ideological tool of the imperial power. This re-aligning of academic interests certainly has had the advantage of integrating instructive and incisive economic analyses with more comprehensive interpretations of the role of Indian railways in a wider ideological context than hitherto perceived. In many ways, this 'cultural turn' in the historiography of colonial Indian railways was signalled (pun intended) by the

publication of a volume edited by Ian Kerr in 2007. Thereafter, the outstanding works by Manu Goswami, Ravi Ahuja, Laura Bear and Nitin Sinha that collectively brought out the ideological and cultural dimensions of the transfer of railway technology in colonial India. Marian Aguiar and Lisa Mitchell too, have further contributed to our understanding of Indian railways both as a tool of colonial control and popular resistance. Such analyses have helped to widen the methodological as well as the historiographical scope of our understanding of the ways in which colonial Indian railways operated within broader social and cultural contexts. At the same time, however, these contributions, particularly Ravi Ahuja and Nitin Sinha's work, have also made a strong case for contextualising railways within wider networks of transport, communication and 'public works' – an appeal that tempers the impact of railways. In short, this historiographical shift also constitutes a demand to move away from 'grand technologies' such as the railways. This certainly squares well with the recent scholarship by the likes of David Arnold, Deep Kanta Lahiri Chaudhuri, Clive Dewey, Smritikumar Sarkar and others. Prasad's book, interestingly, takes a middle ground in this growing debate about different technologies and their differentiating impact, either individual or collective, on colonial Indian society. *Tracks of Change* draws upon these recent and critical scholarly analyses. But at the same time Prasad makes a case for bringing back railway-centred narrative despite awareness of the significance of other means of transport (p. 5).

Not surprisingly, such bold declarations in favour of going back to railway-centred narratives is reflected in the organisational arrangement of the book. As noted, Prasad's focus is on everyday. As such, the seven chapters of this book, excluding the introduction and the conclusion, are designed to convey myriad ways in which Indians in their everyday lives and experiences encountered the new colonial technology. Thematically speaking, the book is well-organised. The first two chapters focus on daily routines of travel and its impact on ordinary Indians. These are followed by three chapters that analyse the various ways in which the railway constructions transformed everyday environment. The last two chapters 'examine how railways and railway spaces lay at the heart of military control, political action, and dissent in colonial India' (p. 9). The concluding chapter of the book compares the colonial Indian railways and the Delhi Metro and argues for a long-term historical understanding of the processes that underpin the 'symmetrical and reciprocal dialogue between technology and society' (p. 282). The introduction and conclusion especially provide a strong historiographical and analytical underpinning for the rest of the chapters. In the introduction, Prasad pays particular attention to methodological issues, especially her use of the conceptual category of 'everyday'. She convincingly argues that the use of 'everyday' as an index of analysis provides both theoretical and practical advantages, and shows that the application of 'everyday in its most colloquial sense' (p. 10) was critical in recovering 'historical and political subjects those who have been deemed anonymous, silent and subordinate' (p. 10). Admittedly drawing upon subaltern historians (especially, Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha) and the study of *Altag* or everyday life (p. 10) Prasad argues that the methodological scope of the book permits a simultaneous examination of 'individual, private and domestic' as well as the 'broad use of the idea of transgression, including within it those acts through which people actively inhabit the large-scale technological abstractions that they routinely face' (pp. 10–11). As for practical advantages, Prasad suggests that the use of 'everyday' allowed her to with a range of encounters between Indians and the railway network that included, but was not restricted to conditions of travel for Indian railway passengers; the role of railway construction and operations on the everyday environment in colonial India (p. 7); the impact of 'railway time' on 'everyday understandings of time, speed and mobility among the colonized population at large'; the influence of railways on everyday issues of critical significance such as spread of contagion and disease; and last but not least, railways as a site of everyday political contestations. In short, the concept of 'everyday' permeates through the chapters, demonstrating a particularly sophisticated use of a methodological approach to practical ends.

Interestingly, Prasad argues that her methodological approach has also allowed her to go beyond the constraints imposed by the colonial archive. Acknowledging the influence of Ranajit Guha and Shahid Amin's works, Prasad indicates that though her sources are 'colonial'; the use of 'everyday' enabled her to interrogate this archive in ways that has yielded local specificities and concerns. More importantly, at a related level, she argues that though her reading of the colonial archive through the prism of the 'everyday'

mostly concerns subaltern populations, yet it also provides the opportunity to discuss 'how the more privileged in the colonial society negotiated with railways (p. 14). It is in this context that Prasad also situates her scholarship within a global narrative of technology transfer and social change. Prasad rightly argues that the story of Indian railways, especially its 'everyday' interactions with Indians and Indian society is 'both a local story of global negotiations and global story of local negotiations' (p. 22). This is a particularly appealing feature of the book, one that connects the social history of Indian railways in the broader global context, without undermining the role of the colonial.

Prasad's deft handling of the idea of the 'colonial' archive while applying the methodological index of the 'everyday' is particularly evident in the first two chapters of the book, which deal with the demands of everyday railway travel in colonial India. The first chapter, titled 'The nature of the beast? An elementary logic for third-class travel', offers a detailed analysis of third-class railway travel in colonial India. In an analysis that heavily draws upon the copious railway passenger statistics, Prasad suggests that the 'structural discomforts and routine indignities created a shared body of knowledge' (p. 26) about the ideology of colonial difference. Focusing on overcrowding of third-class carriages; the widespread use of goods wagons for carrying lower-class passengers; and the consistent refusal of the railway administration to provide lower-class carriages with in-built lavatories, Prasad argues that for most Indians, 'their encounter with technological change was intertwined with their practical experience of colonialism' (p. 57). In itself this analysis is not new. But the chapter certainly goes beyond this and what makes it unique is the way in which Prasad unpacks the category of third-class passengers, claiming that most Indians (though not all) clearly belonged to this category. This colonial specificity she goes on to argue had two interesting components: *one*, the language of 'native peculiarity' deployed by the colonial administration conveniently blamed Indian passengers for their own travelling travails – a discourse that underlined a desire to train the 'irrational' Indian passengers into disciplined colonised subjects; and *two*, how though the third-class railway passengers were disenfranchised, their numerical strength was difficult to ignore for political and legitimising purposes for both the colonial state and the emerging nationalist movement in late 19th-century colonial India. The issue of the numerical significance of third-class passengers is a critical one, and Prasad's analysis certainly makes a valid point. However, besides the evidence of the importance of this issue Prasad provides through a discussion of the amount of time third-class railway passengers 'occupied' in the Imperial Legislative Council, the chapter does not otherwise show the varied and nuanced ways in which the colonial state and the aspiring nationalist movement claimed and counter-claimed the legitimacy to represent third-class railway passengers over the issues of travel conditions in lower-class carriages. Regardless of this shortcoming, the chapter certainly makes a strong case for analysing the persistent woes of the third-class railway passengers through the prism of colonial difference.

The second chapter, 'Demand and supply? Railway space and social taxonomy' continues the theme of the previous one and examines the impact of everyday experiences of shared railway spaces on Indians. This is particularly interesting as it directly speaks to the colonial claim that the conditions of railway travel would have had the consequence of dismantling the hold of caste and religious prejudices over Indian society in general and railway passengers in particular. In this chapter Prasad shows how the nature of railway spaces (public) 'allowed people to simultaneously pursue ideals of a horizontal society and reinstate hierarchies of difference' (p. 59). Prasad examines this wider point by exploring the spaces (reserved carriages, waiting rooms) and the rules (arranging the food and water of diverse bodies of passengers) that influenced Indians' everyday interaction with railway technology. In an interesting and accurate analysis Prasad suggests that for Indian railway passengers, both ordinary and elites, their experiences of railway spaces were shot through contradictions that included differential assessment of 'native needs' by the railway administration, reflected in different attitudes towards acknowledging the rules of commensality practiced by Indian railway passengers, while rejecting demands for separate railway carriages for Indians and Europeans. More importantly, her analysis indicates that the everyday negotiations of Indian railway passengers were also informed through a range of identities that included class, caste, religion and race. Indeed, this is one of the most stimulating aspects of this chapter, especially Prasad's discussion of newspaper articles articulating demands made by Indian railway passengers for separate carriages reserved for different social groups. Despite the

presence of such evidence, Prasad's analysis, however, indicates that of all categories, race played a defining role in shaping everyday railway experience of Indian passengers. The emphasis on the unifying potential of race as an index of identity is particularly evident in her discussion about reserved carriages and access to waiting rooms for Indian passengers, including those who had upper-class tickets. This chapter certainly makes refreshingly new contributions to our understanding of colonial Indian railways on everyday travel experiences and beyond.

The next three chapters are thematically tied to explore the role of railways in shaping everyday environment in colonial India. The chapter 'Crime and punishment: in the shadow of railway embankments' follow the little-known subject of railway construction actively intervening with the existing drainage system in colonial India, causing extensive damage of life and property through flooding. This chapter is an interesting demonstration of railways intersecting and affecting everyday life of Indians beyond its immediate precincts. The concerns expressed in this chapter also chimes well with a relatively recent historiographical shift that examines the impact of colonial Indian railways on environment and ecology. Inasmuch, this chapter contributes to this growing body of literature and underlines the deleterious impact of railway embankments on drainage patterns and subsequent flooding. But beyond this, the chapter also successfully illustrates the significance of railways as an ideological and practical tool in the hands of the imperial authority and how any damage to railways, either real or perceived, attracted punitive actions by the state. As we will see, this a recurring theme in the book, and Prasad returns to it in subsequent chapters. In this chapter, she focuses on 'sabotage', or as the colonial state and the railway authorities described the cutting of the railway embankments by the inhabitants of the affected regions. Such acts of sabotage, Prasad shows attracted punitive punishments for those involved thus underlining the critical economic role of railways for the colonial state. This chapter brings out the complicated and nuanced layers of colonial politics. It shows the ways in which the issue of railway embankments and damage caused to them by ordinary Indians who believed that the former played a crucial role in aiding floods struggled to make their voices heard in a competing political environment wherein the railway companies and various layers of the colonial state successfully averted questions of responsibility and redressal.

The fourth chapter of the book, 'Railway time: speed, synchronization and time-sense', explores the impact of 'railway-time' on everyday temporal sensibilities of ordinary Indians. This chapter illustrates the long, contentious and rich history of transition to 'railway-time' in colonial India. Moreover, it shows that Indians responded to this temporal shift in heterogenous ways, a fact that Prasad argues is crucial in 're-establishing the historical modern as a time shared by colonizer and colonized' (p. 137). At a related level, she suggests that this temporal shift affected millions of Indians, who 'not only had to grapple with standardization, but also with related questions of speed and mobility (p. 136). Evidently, Prasad uses the everyday negotiations of Indian railways passengers with the gradual temporal shift to 'railway-time' as a critical theoretical as well as empirical method to engage with the wider idea that the colonised inhabited the shared time with the colonisers, thereby undermining the implied inferiority of the former. The following chapter, 'Contagion and control: managing disease, epidemics and mobility' shows the role played by railways in spreading contagious diseases such as cholera and plague in colonial India. Drawing upon existing scholarship on railways and its role in spreading diseases and colonial medicine, Prasad claims that railways certainly added to the faster spread of diseases; but she also notes that how railway authorities shared an uneven relationship with contemporary medical knowledge and did not hesitate to turn their back on scientific evidence if it had the potential to disrupt railway operations in India. This, she argues, had a direct bearing on the insanitary conditions in which most passengers were forced to travel in colonial India. Deftly linking the two, she notes that the refusal to ascribe any responsibility to the railways from spreading the diseases was influenced by the fact that railway authorities did not want to acknowledge that passengers were compelled to travel in dehumanising and brutally insanitary conditions. Prasad rightly shows that this refusal was also tied in with subjecting railway passengers to tools of colonial surveillance through physical examinations at the stations, once again highlighting the railways' role as a disciplinary tool of colonial control.

The last two chapters, 'Designing rule: power, efficiency and anxiety'; and 'Marking citizen from denizen: dissent, "rogues" and rupture', expand the theme of railways and colonial order, control and discipline. The

first among these two clearly harks back to an older historiographical tradition and argues for railways' strategic importance for militarily holding the colony together. Prasad explicates this by a detailed discussion of how the locations of railway stations were strategically chosen, as, despite lip service to 'public convenience', these places in reality were designed for imperial defence. Prasad shows how Indians, especially an aggressive and militant nationalist movement, appropriated this colonial tool of control and often used it, with varying degree of success to subvert and challenge the colonial state. Prasad's suggestion about the strategic role of railways and the punitive punishments that were designed by the colonial state to protect this imperial tool of control is certainly accurate. But in the absence of numbers that show actual convictions based on punitive, railway-specific laws, her claims illustrate a gap between the imperial desire to control and its actual implementation. The seventh and the last chapter explores 'the ways in which railways became central to the language and practice of dissent in colonial India' (p. 235). In an empirically detailed and rich analysis, this chapter argues that railway spaces served a dual function of providing a platform for anti-colonial protests as well as marking a disjunction between elite and popular politics (p. 235). The former point is not new, though Prasad's extensive coverage of Gandhi and his strategic (both theoretical and practical) use of the railways marks a significant departure. However, her second assertion that the nature of mass politics as expressed in railway spaces often challenged the rules of formal and elite nationalism is interesting and requires attention. Theoretically speaking, this argument also reflects the clear methodological influence of Shahid Amin's outstanding work, drawing upon which Prasad successfully shows that on many occasions railway spaces allowed ordinary Indians to act in ways which were neither approved nor condoned by the elite nationalist leadership. In this chapter Prasad also comes back to the issue of the significance of the railway network for the political well-being of the colonial state. In the context of violence and disorder within railway spaces, she notes retaliatory responses (p. 248) by the colonial state. Once again, however, this assertion is diluted by the fact that some of the punitive measures were suggested but not realised (p. 250). Nevertheless, the chapter is unique in underlining crucial ways in which mass nationalism appropriated railways in its anti-colonial struggle (p. 259).

As a volume, *Tracks of Change* adds rich and nuanced layers to our current understanding of the impact of colonial Indian railways on the everyday lives of Indians. The author's use of sources is skilful, and so is her interpretative analysis. Having said that, it must be acknowledged that her sources and analysis become stronger and more substantial the closer the book moves to the present day. Also, on more than one occasion she indicates that passenger experiences varied, and so did railway rules; but this idea is never consistently followed up. However, these minor criticisms do not detract from the fact that Prasad's work is outstanding, especially for the ways in which it recovers the everyday encounters between an imperial technology and ordinary Indians. The book deserves a wide audience and is a valuable addition to social historiography of Indian railways.

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