

Railways and The Raj: How the Age of Steam Transformed India

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Christian Wolmar's latest tome *Railways and The Raj: How the Age of Steam Transformed India* is a welcome addition to his existing repertoire of books on railways across the world. The volume offers an accessible account of the history of the railways of the *Raj* since the railway operations commenced in India in 1853. The book also provides a substantial discussion of the Indian Railways' post-*Raj* era story up to the present decade. Wolmar deftly weaves the historical with the contemporary and adds to the charm of the narrative by including a lively description of his travels in trains in India. Wolmar's book therefore aims to straddle the world of academic monographs and popular history, with a dash of personal reminiscence thrown in possibly to add both recent and personal voice. This intent is evident in the first page of the volume as Wolmar claims *Railways and Raj* 'is an attempt to set out a complex story in a clear and simple way, which few other authors have attempted' (p. 1). At a related level, this book, Wolmar suggests, is also a response to a 'surprisingly few books about Indian railway history' and 'none' that covers the covers the story of the 'creation, influence and enduring legacy of the Indian railways in one volume' (p. 1).

Keeping aside the validity of Wolmar's aforementioned historiographical assertion for a later discussion; here however, suffice will be to note that this self-declared goal to simplify the complex story of history Indian railways reflects in the chapter scheme of the book. The volume consists of 11 chapters excluding the introduction. The chapters are thematically arranged to provide the readers with a flowing and connected narrative beginning with the politico-historical contexts in which railways were promoted and subsequently introduced in mid-19th century India to more recent issues such as expanding the railway network to more remote areas and to balance the financial demands of a state funded enterprise with political pressures of various kind.

The introduction sets the tone of the book with a brief, almost off-hand note on historiography of Indian railways. This is followed by practical information mostly aimed at non-Indian tourists since there is a note on place names and how to book tickets online (Wolmar suggests outsourcing the job to a travel agency). Here Wolmar also adds information on varying standards of refreshment arrangements and sanitation amongst different regional railway administrations (zones) in India – possibly a significant cause of concern for non-Indian tourists.

Given the aims of the book outlined in the introduction, not unexpectedly, chapter one discusses in detail the historical contexts influencing the decision of the East India Company to introduce railway communication in India. The commencement of railway operations in India Wolmar argues, was a product of a twin desire to make the colony economically more viable and militarily more secure – a decision that overturned the East India Company's initial reluctance to introduce the benefits of iron horse in a place that was widely considered as challenging for both railway building and subsequent growth of traffic. In India, Wolmar shows how the reluctance against railways was also brushed aside by influential role played by Governor-Generals like Hardinge and Dalhousie, especially the latter.

Convincing the East India Company administration to introduce iron horse in India however, was perhaps not the most difficult challenge. As chapter two demonstrates, questions over financing the proposed railway network in India; differences of opinion over matters of gauge width and the obstacles posed by Indian rivers and mountains especially the Western Ghats, affected the growth of railway development in mid-19th century India. Besides these challenges, for Wolmar the pace of railway expansion in the immediate years after the first trains were introduced in 1853 was also slowed down by Indian resistance to railways. He interprets opposition to railways as symbolic of a wider feeling of disaffection amongst Indians unleashed by the 'westernisation' introduced by the East India Company, sentiments that eventually fuelled the events of 1857–8.

Chapter three summarises how challenges to the expansion of a railway network in India was successfully met by the colonial administration largely by offering land free of cost and guaranteeing a fixed profit to shareholders of the private railway companies based in England. The result Wolmar argues, was a railway network that was expensive to build and profited shareholders of the railway companies and British industries; but nonetheless also served India by producing a skilled workforce (by employing local labour) and helping to form a middle class in the form of clerks and accountants needed to manage railway companies' outposts in India. In the following chapter (four) Wolmar continues to focus on expansion of railway network by discussing in detail state owned lines; famine railways and railways lines to hill-stations such as Darjeeling and Simla.

Chapter five and six, however, move the focus away from the financial and managerial aspects of the railways of the *Raj* to the impact of railways on Indians, both as passengers and employees. Chapter five describes how most Indians travelled in over-crowded third-class carriages with little attention being paid to their comfort by the railway companies and state management alike. The chapter also alludes to the ways in which experiences of travelling had the impact of both heightening and levelling social differences in colonial India (p. 137). Chapter six carries forward the theme of social impact and discrimination against Indians in the context of railway employment. It discusses how Europeans and Eurasians monopolised specialised, high-skilled and better-paid jobs; while Indians were employed in either unskilled jobs or as non-technical staff. These differences in work conditions, Wolmar argues not only strained the relationship between Indian employees and European and Eurasian railway workers, but eventually also added political (read nationalist) connotations to the discrimination suffered by the former.

The following chapters (seven and eight) delve deeper into issues related to politics of railway management in a colonial context. Both the chapters discuss how Indians increasingly felt disaffected by the ways in railways were financed and managed and demanded greater accountability and participation in its daily functioning and management. This opposition to railway management also came at crucial juncture when, especially after the financial strain imposed by the First World War the colonial Indian administration was forced to initiate several long-needed reforms. Wolmar suggests the reforms had a largely positive impact as traffic (both freight and passenger) increased manifold; consequently, bringing in much needed profit.

Chapter nine however shows the gains of post First World War reforms were shortlived. The impact of the Great Depression coupled with a rising nationalist movement affected railway operations financially. Moreover, everyday railway operations too, were adversely affected by strikes by Indian railway workers

and subversions of more subtle variety (pulling communication cords) by passengers. The chapter closes the discussion with the role played by the railways in the partition violence. It also convincingly shows how a newly independent but impoverished India inherited a railway network was beleaguered by challenges including the cost of physically splitting the network between India and Pakistan; the loss of skilled, trained employees; and the damage wrecked by a lack of investment in railways during the Second World War.

Chapter ten is primarily a positive appraisal of post-independence Indian railways. Among other things, Wolmar praises successive Indian governments in salvaging the Indian railways from the wrecks of partition and steering it towards a better future. He is especially approving of the expansion of the network in remote areas or opening of sections such as the Konkan Railways. Wolmar is also clearly impressed by the fact that Indian railways remains publicly owned and financed and notes the behemoth's role as being the largest employer in India. He is however, cognizant of the political pressures that have and continues to influence aspects of railway financing, management and operations in India.

The concluding chapter offers a glimpse of Wolmar's railway travel experiences in India. The chapter is a mix of a sympathetic account of everyday workings of Indian railways and railway workers alongside hackneyed observations evidently aimed at non-Indian tourists. A case in point is Wolmar's claim of how 'European expectations are confounded every time the train leaves promptly and gets to its destination on time' (p. 320). Neither is Wolmar immune to bouts of quasi-philosophical musings that often sprout out of western tourists' pen after the visit to India, especially a long train ride. For instance, looking out from train at passing landscape and people Wolmar expresses surprise as to why Indians seem to possess impressive fortitude or 'they [Indians] do not have much, but seem not to expect much either, and tolerate the conditions with equanimity' (p.330-1).

Such trite descriptions aside; this volume is worth reading if only because of its easy style of narration. Historiographically, however, the book does not add anything new; a particular shame given Wolmar's arguments to the contrary in the introduction. This is not to suggest that Wolmar does not make startling claims. For instance, in chapter one, Wolmar suggests that beyond commercial interests and military security, railways in India should also be seen as a product of altruism, as 'selflessness was a genuine force in Victorian administration' (p-15). Countering oft-prevailing cynical views about the civilizing motives of 19th-century Britons, Wolmar claims 'many supporters of the iron road saw the railways as civilizing influence, one that would, to put it bluntly, make India a bit more like us' (p. 15).

Admittedly, it is difficult to measure 'genuineness', 'selflessness' or for that matter altruistic desires. Consequently, it will be difficult to challenge Wolmar's assertions with counter-claims. It is however possible to show, as historians of Indian railways have done that railways in India were 'Indianised' (which incidentally Wolmar notes more than once in this book). Among other things, this 'Indianisation' meant catering (both literally and metaphorically) to various demands of Indian passengers including employing water suppliers of different castes to provide drinking water to different groups of passengers; constructing separate refreshment rooms for Hindu and Muslim passengers and offering special carriages to carry 'respectable native' women. Presuming 'making them bit like us' is a shorthand for making India modern for Wolmar; railway administrations' evidence of pandering to local needs and conditions suggests dilution of Victorian altruism if only to keep the railways of the *Raj* viable and operational. In other words, it is probably worth being more sceptical of the influence of steam-induced 'Victorian altruism and selflessness' on colonial Indian society than the author suggests.

This, however, is not the only instance of applying sweeping generalisations, including ideas which are not supported by sufficient evidence or are even contradictory. A case in point is Wolmar's discussion of Indian resistance to 'western incursion' via things such as railways. Wolmar suggests (based on Rajendra Aklekar's work) that there were instances of resisting railways in western India (pp. 27-8). Later however, he claims 'most Indians either supported or were indifferent to the advent of railways' (p. 63). Given this, it may be suggested that despite evidence to the contrary, Wolmar adheres to the idea of 'native' resistance to forces of modernisation perhaps because it suits the wider narrative of Victorians bringing civilising influences to the

colonies. The reality however, was more complex. As railway passenger statistics show, Indians took to railways instantaneously and enthusiastically, despite not-so-ideal conditions of travel largely because (like their western counterparts) trains took them to their destinations relatively faster and cheaper.

Similarly, Wolmar's suggestion that 'one of the reasons for treating third-class passengers so badly was the notion that they included numerous criminal elements who necessitated a disciplined approach' (p. 132) is a rather unsubstantiated claim. Even if one believes Wolmar's suggestions, then by implication it means the colonial state took to punishing railway travellers (by forcing them to travel in overcrowded, insanitary carriages) in the hope of also penalising criminals who masqueraded as railway passengers. If this reads like speculation, it indeed is; as there is no basis in archival evidence to support the claim. As is well-known, the conditions in which Indian railway passengers in third-class (or fourth class) carriages were forced to travel had very little to do with their imagined criminal proclivity. If anything, the policies that turned the wheels of the trains of the *Raj* were as much informed by notions of racial inferiority of Indians as they were by a desire to sustain pecuniary gains that amongst other things, militated against investment in additional in rolling stock, one of the primary reason behind overcrowding and harassment of Indian passengers.

One can go on adding such instances; the drift however, is clear. At a risk of speculation, it is perhaps Wolmar's choice of sources that offer a clue to understand his puzzling historiographical assertions. Interestingly, Wolmar is clearly familiar with the scholarship on Indian railways, including some of the most recent ones. Yet, he uses dated and cliché-ridden sources such as Edward Davidson's book (first published in 1868) to expound on issues such supply of Indian labour for railway construction. The result, as is hinted above, is reproduction of stereotypes about India and role of railways on Indian society validity of which has been either discarded or questioned by historians of Indian railways. At a related level, perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to suggest that Wolmar's volume reinforces the idea of technology transfer in a colonial context as a one-way street in which the role of the 'natives' was confined either to resisting the modernising impulse (only to acquiesce subsequently) or to being shaped by it without any agency or ways of negotiating with the process. As recent historiography on Indian railways has convincingly shown, the transmission of railway technology in colonial India was anything but one-sided. On the contrary, the process entailed complex negotiations and contestations between the colonial state and Indian railway passengers.

That said, as noted above, the book offers an accessible account of past and present of Indian railways alongside illustrations and maps. It will prove to be an enjoyable read and provides a lively description of the experience of railway travel in contemporary India.

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