



Railway, Train and Journey: Society, Thoughts, Time and Space

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Abstract

Trains have a tremendous impact on the human conscience. The objective of the paper is to study the impact of trains and railways on the people of India. The paper covers domains such as political, social, environmental, literature, architecture, culture, and so on. Based on the works of Wolfgang Schivelbusch, the paper tries to explore the Indian context and the impact the machine ensemble (Railways) had in India. It led to the evolution of new cultures such as debate and discussion inside the train, further it also created apprehension among the people as the technology was introduced by the colonial government for their colonial objectives. The impact of railways was not limited to humans alone as it had unprecedented ecological consequences as well.

Key Words: Trains, Time and Space, National Movement

Railway: A Disruptive Technology

The impact of railways has been phenomenal since its introduction in the 19th century on all aspects of human life. It changed the way we perceive our world and society as it led to the shrinking of space and also amended the concept of time. The train was the disruptive technology of its time period that altered the existing spatial-temporal notions and was seen with fear as well as curiosity. Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his remarkable book *The railways Journey* explored the impact of technological advancement on the human psyche and the concept of the world perceived by society. The most visible impact of railways was the rapid industrialisation of the Western world as it facilitated the flow of goods and services from and to the hinterland and core regions. However, the implications of trains were not limited to just the economic sphere but even pervaded the other domains including the lives of people and changed their perception of the world, architecture, medical science,

city planning and so on.¹ Similar to contemporary disruptive technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Internet of Things, railways were seen with similar anxiety, fear and curiosity. There was also a visible class difference when it came to adaptation and accessibility to such technology. The impact of railways was multipronged and the paper attempts to study those impacts on human lives.

The railway, as discussed at the beginning of the paper, altered the existing concept of time and space as it reduced the time taken to cover distances. It had two-pronged impacts, one, it brought places closer and had broader political and social implications facilitating national integration and socio-cultural interaction. Second, it saved time and changed the concept of distance as earlier it depended on natural space. The steam-powered engines of rail were to an extent indifferent to nature and to an extent conquered it. Before the steam engines, travelling depended on the physical strength of animals as well as humans where natural factors such as weather and terrain determined the time and distance of a journey. The invention of the steam engine and railways brought a monumental shift in the way journeys were perceived. The mechanical power of the railways conquered the natural space and formed its own spatiality as it was free from limitations that troubled 'animal power' such as exhaustion.²

Shrinking Spaces

The impact of train travel was described in the early nineteenth century as the 'annihilation of time and space.' The idea was centred on how rapidly the new mode of transportation could cover the distance. With the railway, it was suddenly possible to cover a certain spatial distance that had previously required a fixed amount of journey time in a fraction of that time, or to convey it differently, the same amount of time allowed one to cover more spatial distance. This resulted in a decrease in space in terms of transportation economics.³ Depending on the evaluator's economic and ideological standpoint, the shrinkage of the natural space caused by mechanical transportation by railways was regarded and assessed accordingly. Gandhi Ji had beautifully elaborated on the different objectives railways served for different people. For the British Raj, it was an instrument of control and exploitation. It allowed them to swiftly move their army all over India and transport

¹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch; *The railwaysJourney: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Berg Publications, 1977.

² Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The railwaysJourney: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Berg Publications, 1977, pp. 27-28.

³ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. "Railroad Space and Railroad Time." *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, 1st ed., University of California Press, 2014, pp. 33–44.

raw materials from the hinterland to the ports. On the other hand, the same railways were used by the Mahatma to reach the oppressed and seek their support in the national movement against the same Britishers who used the railways for exploitation. Gandhi was also aware of the shrinking of space and destruction of natural barriers after the trains as he further talks about while introducing the spiritual aspect, that:

‘...but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, the masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs. Formerly we had natural segregation. Railways have also increased the frequency of famines because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless and so the pressure of famine increases. Railways accentuate the evil nature of man: Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very great difficulty. Generally, therefore, only the real devotees visited such places. Nowadays rogues visit them in order to practise their roguery.’⁴

Railways do not expand in isolation and with it develops a system of network and communication which along with facilitating the movement of the trains on the track, make communication faster and smoother. It was not just the shrinking of the physical space and tangible changes but systems like telegraphs which expanded along with the railways ensuring proximity of people and places. Talking and communicating became easier, convenient and time-saving. The technical improvement that railways brought, such as the telegram was the nervous system of the whole system⁵ and was part of the machine ensemble that had a significant impact on the human psyche. The telegraph wire and poles moving past with the forward motion of the train made the travellers realise the tremendous enhancement in the travelling speed and also instilled a sense of thrill. The machine ensemble was also an instrument of control for the imperialist powers as it was extensively used to suppress revolts, movements and rebellions. Rawland McDonald Stephenson in his *Report Upon Practicability and Advantages of the Introduction of Railways into British India* of 1844 prioritised the expansion of railways in India from a military point of view as it made the movement of troops easier.

⁴ Gandhi, M.K. “The Condition of India (Continued) : Railways.” *Hind Swaraj*.

⁵ In Dolf Sternberger, *Panorama, oder Ansichten vom 19. Jahrhundert*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg, 1955); translated as *Panorama of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford and New York, 1978).

However, as in the words of Daniel Headrick, it was a double-edged sword⁶ with nationalists using railways and telegraphs to spread information and bring the nation together.⁷ Indians, aware of the instrumentality of railways and telegraph lines for the colonial government to suppress movements and protests, during the Quit India movement called railroad strikes and cut down telegraph wires to disrupt government communication. The impact and utility of the machine ensemble of railways on the people depended on their political and economical situation as for the British it was an instrument to control the subjects, for the Indians it was a symbol of state oppression and aware of the importance of the ensemble for the Imperialist the nationalist targeted it during the Quit India movement. However, the impact of railways was not always political or economic but it also gave birth to a new culture of travelling but also influencing the existing culture of literature, architecture, and city planning.

Creating Spaces and New Domains

Schivelbusch talks about the growth of reading culture in trains as the inconvenience of uneven roads disappeared⁸. In the Western countries, it became obligatory to buy books or newspapers before travelling and a number of book stalls were opened in England and France in the first half of the 19th century to fulfil the demand which came exclusively from the bourgeois class. However, in India, where most people didn't know how to read a culture of political discussion, card games, and food sharing. The trains and politics in India are difficult to separate as the origin and growth of the railways were political in nature, as discussed above. The colonial government used it to exert control and the people used it to promote nationalist ideas. The culture continued even after independence as politics is one of the most discussed topics inside a train where people shared and discussed the policies and ideologies of political parties and leaders. Railways not only promoted the culture of debate and discussion inside the compartments but also influenced the literature and writings changing the metaphors and creating new ones. Aruna Awasthi in her *Railway and Cultural History* has deliberated on the influence of railways on poetry in India. Terms associated with railways like train, speed,

⁶ Headrick, Daniel. "A Double-Edged Sword: Communications and Imperial Control in British India." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 35, no. 1 (131), 2010, pp. 51–65.

⁷ Gandhi extensively used railways to travel all over India to connect with people and bring them together for a single cause. Railways enabled the members of the Indian National Congress to travel to places and attend the sessions of the party organised at different corners of the country.

⁸ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The railwaysJourney: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Berg Publications, 1977, pp-71.

and train's relentless uniform motions were used by poets like Israr-ul Huq Majaaz, and Josh Malihabadi in poems as metaphors.⁹ For instance, Malihabadi has compared his unfortunate love life with a train journey which stops at stations but doesn't arrive at a destination:

'...Pewast hai jo dil me wo teer khenchta hoon

Ek rail ke safr ki tasweer khenchta hoon'.

Rabindranath Tagore was also deeply enthralled by the evolution of human conduct and was drawn to the sociological ties of a newly characterised public space. Railway stations and trains had become a spot where unexpected interactions and attractions unfolded driving the curiosity of human behaviour and establishing social connections. Tagore in his poem '*Hotah Dhaekha – a sudden meeting*' expresses the extension of a woman's activity and liberty in the uncertain realm of trains and stations.¹⁰ Stations and trains were the spheres where restrictive social norms were broken and transgressed. The poem reads:

'Railgaadir kamadaaye hotah dekha

Bhabhini shombhob hobe-baar dekhchi

Laal ronger shadi te

Daalim pholer moton ranga

Aaj podeche kalo reshomer kaapod

Anchal tuleche mathe

...ami chilem onno benchi te ore

Shaathi der shonge

Ak shomaye aangul need janale kache aashte

Mono holo kom shahosh nai

Boshlum ore benchi te

...hotath kaborer kaagoj phele diye

Aamake korlo nomoshkar

Shomaj bidhir poth galo khule'.¹¹

⁹ Awasthi, Aruna. "RAILWAYS AND CULTURAL HISTORY: A STUDY OF POETIC REPRESENTATIONS." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 72, 2011, pp. 955–67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Hotath Dhaeka/ Sudden meeting in*, Sanchaita, pp. 719.721.

The poem is about a sudden meeting of two people in love who suddenly meet on the train and the woman, inside the train compartment is bold enough to signal her lover to come and sit beside her. If the train was a place to meet, it also represented the separation and parting of beloved ones, especially in the states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where males of the family frequently migrate to other states for work. The train was compared to a rival wife who takes away the husband with her. There is a *Bhojpuri* folk song describing the plight of the wife whose husband is going out to work and she blames the train for his departure and all her worries and treats the train as her husband's second wife:

'Reiliya bairan piya ko liye jaaye re/train-the rival wife is taking away my beloved

Paani barse tikas gal jaaye re, reliya bairan/let the ticket get wet and destroyed by the rain, rival train'.

Railways further brought changes in the natural as well as the architectural landscape in the 19th century, expanding the human imagination and creativity. The railways promoted a new kind of architecture in Europe as well as all other parts of the world. The stations, ticket counters, foot-over bridge, waiting room and other places associated with the train and its destination were perceived as spaces where changes were introduced in designs. They became the domain to experiment with ideas and the architectural style that evolved marked a departure from the existing designs and building plans. Schivelbusch has highlighted the changes in Europe such as the use of glass and steel in the construction of railway stations which were in contrast with the brick structures that existed outside.¹² The stations represented the industrial character of the railways. In India, however, the Indian Railways made a major contribution to the nation's rich architectural history. These structures mostly use Neoclassical, Romanesque, Italianate, Gothic Revival, and Indo-Saracenic architectural styles. The stations became the place to represent the best architectural styles of the country. For instance, an outstanding example of Victorian Gothic Revival architecture in India, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai, originally known as Victoria Terminus Station, incorporates elements of Indian traditional architecture. The structure, created by the British architect F. W. Stevens, came to represent Bombay as India's main international port of commerce and the 'Gothic City. The High Victorian Gothic design of the

¹² Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The railways Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Berg Publications, 1977, pp-158.

terminal, which was based on late mediaeval Italian models, took ten years to complete commencing in 1878.

Its impressive stone dome, turrets, pointed arches, and peculiar floor plans are reminiscent of ancient Indian palace architecture. It is a remarkable illustration of the blending of two styles since Indian craftsmen and British architects collaborated to incorporate Indian architectural heritage and motifs.¹³ The Terminus was also the symbol of colonial authority and power which was used by the British Raj to showcase their “cultural superiority”. The railways in India also affected city planning and the colonial objective was to exploit it for their imperialist objectives. Due to its pervasive nature, the expansion of railways had unintended implications for city planning, traffic, and architecture. The railway tracks were permanent in nature and any modification in the city plan and traffic had to take into account the ‘train factor’. Railways interacted with the city and influenced its development. Such interaction was visible in Delhi where the laying of railway tracks choked the expansion of the city. In the first decade of the 20th century when the Delhi municipality wanted to expand the city, the railway tracks were immobile barriers that moved sharply in the north coming from the east. The western wall of the old city was followed by the railway tracks and it became a barrier to the expansion of the city. The railway lines were laid in the 1860s when the municipality had no opinion in the construction of the tracks and in the 20th century, the immobility of the railway lines was a challenge in the expansion of the cramped-up city. When the Municipality decided to tear down the section of wall between Kabul and Ajmeri Gates in 1905 because it was impeding the expansion of the city, they discovered that the railroad line had become a new obstruction.¹⁴ There was always a tussle between the municipality and the rail companies for more space and land.

The Negatives

Railways also negatively affected the forests and ecology of India and were one of the major reasons behind the decline of forests with trees being cut down to be used as sleepers.¹⁵ Woods were not only used as sleepers but also as fuel to run the train, in the construction of coaches and stations. Further, the woods were used by brick kilns for manufacturing bricks which were in huge demand by the rail industry for the construction of

¹³ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/945/>

¹⁴ Gupta, N. *Delhi between Two Empires, 1830-1931: Society, Government, and Urban Growth*, Oxford University Press 1981, pp 170-175.

¹⁵ Watts, SJ. *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*, Yale, 1997, pp-204.

bridges and buildings. Indian railway expansion included the production of a significant amount of bricks, which were closely regulated by the railway corporations and delivered by the British Indian government.¹⁶ Deodar, teak, and sal are some of the major trees found in the forests of India and are known for their hardwood. As the construction of railways began, the teaks declined rapidly in the forests of the Malabar coast and the Western Ghats and the Himalayan forest was ravaged for laying railway tracks in the northern plain. Similar to this, the dense sal forests of the submontane regions, which extend thousands of kilometres from western Terai down into Bengal, were consumed for the railway project due to their tough, particularly ant-resistant fibres. For the purpose of making sleepers, these magnificent sal forests were quickly depleted, and no one assumed any responsibility for replanting sal trees.¹⁷ The tragedy of the disappearance of the forests was repeated all over India. For instance, the creation of Madras Railways led to the extensive destruction of forests since Madras Railways relied more on firewood than coal. The basic explanation was that wood was less expensive than coal. However, more wood than the coal was needed to power the rail engine.¹⁸

The impact of railways was not limited to the political, economic or environmental sphere. The one such impact railways had was the trauma the travellers faced in case of accident and derailment as with speed comes thrill and also the chances to face accidents. Railways immensely increased the speed of human mobility which was earlier limited to the movement of animals such as horses and oxen. Journey was a time-taking affair and uneven roads made them difficult to endure. The precaution required before travel was different from the advent of the railway. The risks involved engagement with human and natural factors such as robbery or harsh weather. Railways brought with it a dramatic shift in the travel experience as the journey was no longer prone to old risks as the carriers were comfortable and safe from such risks. However, the risks involved in train journeys were new and unprecedented which left, in case of an accident, the traveller traumatised which was an unknown experience. One such early example we have is of Charles Dickens. He met with a rail accident in 1865 when he was travelling with his mother to London. During the accident, he helped his mother and fellow travellers who got injured. But after the accident, he was shaken, stressed and lost his voice for 2 weeks. The accident left him 'persistent illusion' that the train coach was tilted to the left. He also developed

¹⁶ Kerr, I. *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900*, Oxford, 1997, pp-145.

¹⁷ Richard Tucker, 'The British Colonial System and the Forests of the Western Himalayas, 1815-1914' in Richard Tucker and John Richards (eds), *Global Deforestation and the 19th Century World Economy*, Durham, 1983, pp-158-59.

¹⁸ Satya, Laxman D. "British Imperial Railways in Nineteenth Century South Asia." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 43, no. 47, 2008, pp. 69-77.

sudden vague rushes of terror, which were "perfectly unreasonable but unsurmountable." Occasionally, he was unaware of the presence of others and seemed in a kind of trance.¹⁹ The symptoms he developed after the accident, in modern medical terms, is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In Victorian Britain, the idea of psychological trauma started to take hold in or around the middle of the 1860s. It is argued that the railroad is what exposed it to our attention.²⁰

Conclusion

The railways' impact on human civilization and psyche was multi-dimensional. Trains were, although invented to serve the industrial purpose, influenced every aspect of human lives from economic to cultural and psychological. Technology was used by different people for different objectives. It is undeniable that it changed the way we perceived distance and time but its impact was not limited to the Spatio-temporal domain. In India, we see its impact was visible in all the domains affecting the life of the people, be it cultural, social, political or environmental. Railways have been the disruptive technology which affected the course of history and the human psyche.



¹⁹ Matus, Jill L. "Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2001, pp. 413–36.

²⁰ Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.