

Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900

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Editorial: Oxford University Pres

Año: 1995

ISBN: 0195634446

Páginas: 273

Ian Kerr's Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900 is now a classic, a foundational text to which both scholars and amateurs turn to acquire a basic grasp of the history of the Indian Railways (hereafter IR).

However, Kerr's volume was a seminal contribution even at the moment of its publication. This was largely because since India's independence (1947) till well into the mid-1990s, interest in the history of the IR was not widespread (Thorner, 1950; Westwood, 1975). Additionally, this limited attention mostly underlined railway network's adverse impact on the economy of colonial India, especially on aspects such as British investment and returns from railway construction and operations; and expansion and integration of markets (Hurd II, 1975; Thorner, 1950). Sporadically, historians also noted railways' impact on transmission of disease or on emergence of industrial labour force in India (Chakrabarty, 1989; Klein, 1988). But there was little sustained interest in the IR, validating Kerr's claim that the railway network was taken for

granted (p. 186) – perhaps by travellers and historians alike¹.

As the title of the Kerr's book suggests, the volume is about the building the railways of colonial India, a network that started at a modest pace in 1850s and by the turn of the twentieth century was the fourth largest railway network in the world². Evidently, this was no mean achievement, especially given the size of India as well as the varied and challenging terrain of the region³. Kerr's book tells this story; though as the author candidly, if somewhat plaintively admits in the preface, the volume was initially envisaged as a narrative of how Indians (both construction labourers and operating staff) built the IR (p. XI). However, through the process of writing, the book diverged from this intended course. This was both due to an absence of a well-narrated account of how and by whom the IR was built (p. XII); as well as Kerr's own reappraisal about the "nature, consequence and direction of labour within the emergence of capitalism" (p. XII). The resulting book therefore is about how British built the IR, through the labour power of "tens of millions of Indian" (p. XII). This change in focus of the book provides the clue to understand the thematic organisation of the volume. The book has five chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion. Of these, three chapters focus on aspects of British management (broadly defined) of the railway construction processes, while

¹ Since late 1980s Kerr himself however has been writing about different aspects of history of the IR and construction and operating railway workers. See: Kerr, 1983; Kerr, 1985.

² The focus in on first 50 years, i.e., 1850-1900, as major trunk lines built during this period. Post

1900 few railway lines were built, though maintenance and repair remained an important aspect of railway operations.

³ Significant here will be to remember *colonial India* refers to a much larger geographical unit than present-day republic of India.

the other two brings in Indian construction workers in sharper focus. In Kerr's words, the book therefore is about "people who built the railways of the Raj and those who managed the construction process" (p. 2). The introduction sets out the parameters of the book and provides a detailed explanation of why the book is different from what was originally intended. Kerr suggests a detailed "from below" sociocultural history of Indian construction labour "must come later" because there was not much understanding of "what was above that gave shape and direction to the construction process" (p. 3). At a related level, the introduction also delves into theories that underpin ideas about the emergence of industrial proletariat and contextualises Indian railway construction workers within this larger paradigm.

Chapter two carries set out the political and financial context in which railway building started in colonial India. More specifically, the chapter outlines how the idea of railways in India gained slow favour amongst imperial administrators and British railways builders and promoters, with eventually in 1849 two private companies: The Great Indian Peninsular Railways and the Eastern Indian Railway permitted to build and operate their own lines. And though, this initial initiative came from private companies, the chapter shows railway building in India was a combination of both private and government enterprise, with the latter enjoying extensive powers (even when private companies operated their lines) "over most aspects of railway development, construction and operation in the In-

dian subcontinent" (p. 19). This is followed by chapter three that provides a detailed and animated account of contractors and engineers who got the railways built. The chapter shows how specificities of railway construction in India (e.g., labour recruitment and terrain) lead to emergence of distinct managerial practices such as favouring petty contractors, including Indians for subcontracting as opposed to the British practice of tendering contract to big contractors; and "departmental system", where engineers of private railway companies or of the State railway lines acted as contractors (p. 187).

Moving away from managerial hierarchy, chapter four discusses recruitment of labour and shows how railway construction work transformed labour market in colonial India by creating a pool of circulating labour. At the same time, the chapter also underlines continuation of more *traditional* labour market drawn from local and seasonally available hands. Railway construction, this chapter shows, hinged upon physical labour of millions of Indians including large numbers of women and children. Chapter five carries forward the theme of labour with a focus on of different kinds of work (skilled and unskilled) associated with railway construction and the working conditions in which labourers functioned. Interestingly, the chapter shows, working conditions and the boundaries of what was considered skilled/unskilled was variable, and was shaped as much by importation of British technical knowledge as was by time-tested Indian construction practices (e.g., carrying soil on head in baskets instead of using wheelbarrows).

Chapter six too, adds to the theme of labour, though the focus here is narrowly on Indian workers and the varying ways in which they resisted the demands of the British railway management. However, in aligning with the wider focus of the book, the chapter also shows how the managerial hierarchy dealt with workers' resistance. At a related level, the chapter also brings out how workers' resistance, especially strikes lead to a creation of a legal framework (e.g., Act X of 1860) which showed the colonial state's support for capital as opposed to workers' rights. As noted above, *Building the Railways of the Raj* remains a classic and a to-go volume. This is because the volume contains information that is hard to come by while the analysis is rigorously empirical. Relevant here will be to note, the rich and detailed information contained in the pages of the volume have been selected from archives across India and the United Kingdom, including some not-so-used records such as the *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*. As such, the book provides invaluable accessibility to vital and otherwise scattered IR statistics⁴. Equally importantly, despite focusing on British, the book offers vital information on various groups of Indians who participated in the railway construction processes. And though the information on IR construction workers remains vital; the pages on Indian subcontractors is especially revealing. For instance, the relationships between Indian subcontractors and British (administrators, big

contractors, and engineers) shows the vital role of Indians in shaping the construction of the IR, thus challenging the idea of technology transfer in a colonial context as mere imposition from above and acquiescence from below.

At a related level, the book also makes a vital contribution, perhaps unwittingly, to our understanding of the nature of the colonial Indian administration through the lens of railway. After all, the observation that despite evident accomplishment in building a railway network spanning length and breadth of India, the control and coordination in the managerial hierarchy was not a monolith (pp. 10-11) brings to relief an important aspect of the imperial administration in India. Similarly, the evidence that extensive government supervision (both Government of India and provincial ones) "worked directly against" economy of construction (p. 19) shows contradictions between rhetoric of imperial administration (private enterprise and non-intervention) and realities (intervention in minute details of railway building).

In these contexts, the book certainly had set the benchmark for future scholarship, especially the recent literature highlighting how everyday experiences of railway travel in India can be understood through the lens of interaction between Indians and the colonial administration (Mukhopadhyay, 2018; Prasad, 2015). At the same time, however, no book is perfect, if only because no scholar can anticipate the myriad directions in which scholarship will travel. Given this, one of the shortcom-

⁴ Records of the IR is both massive and spread over India and the UK. In personal

correspondence with the author, Ian Kerr once described IR archive as a "black hole".

ings of this volume is an absence of any discussion how railway construction disrupted natural environment in colonial India. It will not be an exaggeration to claim that in this volume, railway building is interpreted through the nineteenth century lens of progress and mastery of human will over nature. This, as we now know, cannot be further from truth – and railway building in colonial India had long-term and deleterious impact on the region's ecology and natural resources (Das, 2015). The book is also rather old-fashioned in its adherence to Marxist idea of “transition from formal to real subsumption of labour under capital” (p. XII) and does not sufficiently acknowledge divergent interactions between capital and labour in a colonial setting in the nineteenth century.

These aspects notwithstanding, Kerr's *Building the Railways of the Raj* illustrates high standards of historical scholarship and will remain an important source for understanding the long, complex, and rich history of the colonial Indian railways.

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