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**The Introduction of Railways and the Genesis of Modern Workers in  
Colonial India (1860-1906)**

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**Abstract:***The introduction of railways in India in 1853 had brought massive changes in the history of emergence of working classes in India. The Indian railways were financed by the British capital and built by the Indian workers. It required million of workers with different kind of skills. Railway led to the genesis of wage earning classes who from the beginning of this project had to fight against the discriminatory measures of the management. They protested against low wages, racial discrimination, long hours of work and so on. The railway working class followed several kind of technique in their protest to express their grievances against the European authority. Their technique of protest was expected to guide the workers movement in other sector. In latter phase the strike of the railway working class felt strong impact on the society and economy of India. Though strikes are not the only form of workers protest but strikes are highly historically documented than other form of protest. Nationalist leaders also realized the significance of railway working movement and merged them in national upsurge against colonial rule. National leaders came ahead to guide them and they gradually organized themselves for the sake of their own.*

**Keywords:** *Capitalism, Communalism, Discrimination, European Authority, Railway*

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*'The development of the country by the construction of railways...is the method by which we can materially improve the condition of the vast population dependent upon agriculture most surely and most steadily'*

Lord Elgin

## Introduction

The introduction of railways in India had a long period of discussion and implementation by the colonial rulers. The earliest proposal for the construction of railway was made in Madras in 1831. But this railway was to be drawn by using animal power. In 1834 the proposal came from England for the construction of steam-driven railways in India <sup>1</sup>. In 1836 captain A.P.Cotton, civil engineer, Madras, expressed his opinion in favor of building of railways which would connect Madras with Bombay by a route of about 862 miles via Wallajahnagore, Arcort, Nellore, Bangalore, Bellary and Poona. Though Madras was the first presidency which made proposal for railroad in India but it had to wait long for the railways than Bombay and Calcutta <sup>2</sup>. In 1842 Mr.C.B.Vignoles submitted a report to the East India Company regarding the construction of railways in India. In 1843 – 44 the promoters of a company, headed by Sir Macdonald Stephnson <sup>3</sup> forwarded a proposal for the railway in India. Horace Bell pointed out that, “we were then on the eve, in England, of the period known as that of the ‘railway mania’; the imagination of projectors drew railways penetrating into every known land; and while they expected that they should be mainly financed in Lombard Street, they were still more certain that they could only be carried out by English engineers. It is not to be wondered at that India should have received their early attention. Yet the condition of that country at the time could have given little hope of success. We had but recently conquered Sind, and with a new Governor General, Lord Hardinge, were rapidly drifting into the struggle with Ranjeet Singh, which was to end in an annexation of the Punjab. Thus, apart from the comparative novelty of railways, even in Europe, and in face of much more serious and urgent matters, it would not have been surprising if the ‘Honourable Board’ in Leadenhall Street had regarded the proposals as untimely or premature. This, however, does not appear to have the view taken at any time, either at home or in India, and notwithstanding that much more weighty business in hand, the railway promoter found himself in favour, and a desire shown to help rather than retard the progress of his schemes ”<sup>4</sup>. The year 1849 brought good

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opportunity when Lord Dalhousie with strong supporter of railroad arrived as a Governor-General of India. He had a vast experience as a head of the Board of Trade in England which helped him lot in the development of railway in India. He wrote in his famous minute (1853), “the commercial and social advantages which India would derive from their establishment are, I truly believe beyond all present calculation....England is calling aloud for the cotton which India does already produce in some degree, and would produce sufficient in quality and plentiful in quantity, if only they were provided the fitting means of conveyance for it from distant plains to the several ports adopted for its shipment. Every increase of facilities for trade has been attended, as we have seen, with an increased demand for articles of European produce in the most distant markets of India”<sup>5</sup>. It was decided that the private companies would be allowed to build railroad in India. The East India railway (EIR) Company was given the work to build a track running for just twenty four miles and another company named the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Company (GIP) was allowed to build a line in Bombay. Finally the first train ran from Bombay (Mumbai) to Thana (Thane) on Saturday April 16, 1853. The train was started from Bombay at 3:30 p.m. and arrived at Thana at 4:45 p.m. with a fourteen carriage pulled by three engines. Large crowds gathered with a band and the day was marked by a 21 gun salute. One orator remarked at the Thana banquet: ‘a well desired system of Railways, ably and prudently executed, would be the most powerful at all worldly instruments of the advancement of civilization in every respect....’<sup>6</sup>.

### **I**

Transport plays very important role in economic development of a country. Railways in India introduced several changes in Indian economy. To operate the vast system, railways needed large number of employees to perform different kind of works. It was the actual effort of the railway workers that make the railways running timely and systemically. The labour force of railways should be given proper attention upon which the wheel turn into motion. The construction of railway was no doubt a human oriented project where large numbers of workers were needed. The British started railways through the labour power of India. These construction workers had to work within the capitalist framework which made a new relationship and consciousness among workers. British capitalists were invited to invest capital in Indian railways with a guarantee of five percent return if the railway companies’ dividend fell below that. The engagement of workers

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in construction work was not new in India but what made them unique was that they came under aegis of foreign capital. In 1770 a British official in Madras observed groups composed of men, women and children who formed ‘a kind of travelling community of their own under a species of Government peculiar to themselves, with laws and customs which they follow and observe wherever they go’. These itinerant, coveted groups of earth and stone workers – ‘even courted by princes’ circulated from worksite to worksite where they dug tanks (small reservoirs), ditches, and wells, and built roads and fortifications. They live close to their worksite in ‘temporary huts which they throw up for the occasion, and always chose a spot distinct from any village, wandering from one place to another as is most convenient’<sup>7</sup>. Now these workers under the colonial supervision needed to work within the new rules, discipline and specific timetable which was previously different from this framework. According to British entrepreneurs and bureaucrats, ‘railway drew Indian society – composed of agriculturists suffering under the tyranny of moneylenders, landowners, and caste - into the world of enterprise and work discipline’<sup>8</sup>. Many scholars believed that the railway must brought important changes in the labour history of India. Karl Marx considered the railways as a ‘forerunner of modern industry’. He argued that ‘modern industry resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary division of labour upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power’<sup>9</sup>. The capitalist system was marked by the export of goods and capital to the colonised land. It was proved that workers involved in railway were entering from a traditional economy to the capitalist phase. This transitional phase created a new class of modern proletariat in the country, the railway workers. Now they could be termed as wage earning labours. Both the skilled and unskilled workers were employed and it also provided them an alternative work during non – harvesting time<sup>10</sup>. The railways have also brought about the mobility of labour<sup>11</sup>. In 1870 about seventy five million pounds were invested for railways in India. The labour force in Indian railway increased gradually with the extension of railroad. Modern Indian working class emerged from the building of railways in India. The workers were divided into various categories such as carpenters, masons, smiths and so on. The division of labour could be classified in three categories – (1) one group was family units where men, women and children joined as a construction workers. (2) In some work site such as Madras site majority of the workers were women and children. (3) In many construction sites the work was divided between men on one hand and women and children on the other hand within the families. In the writing of Davidson it was found that in the construction site

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of South Birbhum of EIR, - men, women and children brought earth in small basket on their head. The workers were encouraged to use wheelbarrows to move earth. Through the wheelbarrows earth could be moved more easily than the head basket. But the Indian workers preferred to use head basket instead of wheelbarrow. The workers were convinced to work in a certain way accompanied with new skill and new machine. In order to operate the railways, the colonies needed substantial, industrial workforces drawn from the indigenous population.

### **II**

The workers employed for different type of work in railways have been considered as the railway working class. They were recruited from a different section of the society. They belong to different caste, race and religion. Men, women and children were mobilized to build the railways. Sometime availability of large number of workers reduced the use of technology and the cheap labour could be profitably exploited. They worked as a manual labourers, diggers and movers<sup>12</sup>. In these labour intensive operation men, women and children sold their labour power. These large numbers of workers who could be identified as ‘gang workers’ was the main force behind the construction of railways in India. These gang workers were recruited and controlled by the contractors in a classic colonial policy of divide and control. To attract the local people in railway works sometime the free lines were erected for the use of unskilled poor labourers. The workers were recruited in a calculative way by contractors in order to make construction process without any obstacle and delay. The case study of Kharagpur railway under the Bengal Nagpur Railway (BNR) company is appropriate to mention here. Here most of the workers were from Madras presidency, Bihar, U.P which was affected by the famine and plague in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So it was easy to recruit workers at a very low wage. The disturbance of this area particularly by the Paik and Chuar who had a rebellious spirit forced the agent to recruit workers from outside this region. The European Zamindars of Midnapore objected the recruitment of local people as they wanted to use Santal labour for jungle – clearing and cultivation. Soon the Kharagpur area became populated with migrant workers. It was also found that local people also were not very much interested to work in railroad as most of them work in agricultural field. Local people also believed that it was more prestigious to work in cultivable land than in railway dominated by the European people. They did not like workshop or factory because here people needed to work long

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hours under terribly conditions and rigid discipline. Thus the Kharagpur railway became a centre of heterogeneous workers belonging to various racial and language groups<sup>13</sup>. British railway administration was not in favour of united labour force on railway and always wanted to maintain racial discrimination. They introduced worst kind of communalism in the railway services. The identities of workers were different to each other: the British considered them as a symbol of the Raj but to the Indians it signifies opposite meaning – exploitation, humiliation and the imperial arrogance of the *frengi*<sup>14</sup>. This kind of attitude created complexities in the treatment of the labour and was source of great weakness to the labour movement. The communal consideration was the main basis in the employment in the superior posts in the railway services<sup>15</sup>. Most of upper posts like guards, drivers and supervisory staff in the workshop were preserved for the upper classes. From the beginning, domiciled Europeans and Eurasians were recruited to upper subordinate posts and Indians for lowest levels of the hierarchy. Even as late as 1923 nearly half of the Anglo – Indian community were employed by the railway and in 1932 almost 100 percent upper subordinate position on the state managed railways were filled by the Anglo – Indians and Europeans. This kind of system led to the formation of communal identities which made the senses of *Jati* more sentimental<sup>16</sup>.

The strength of different groups of employees on two railways were as follows:

Railway Systems	Europeans	Anglo – Indians	Indians	Total
BNR	634	815	38,526	39,975
EIR	1,712	1,248	98,843	101,803

(Sinha, Nitin; *The World of Workers' Politics: Some Issues of Railway Workers in Colonial India 1918- 1922*, Modern Asian Studies, volume 42, No.5, Sep.2008, p.1002, Cambridge University Press.)

The men who were engaged in the construction of railway did not accept every rules and new modification in labour process imposing by the colonial rail authority in India. They raised their voice against the oppression, exploitation, brutality and harsh conditions at work-sites. Though they did not always consciously put their resistance against capitalism but in many ways it reflects their present state of mind, their previous history and the present condition under which they worked. They resisted in many forms, “from what could almost be characterized as ‘inaction’, to

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direct, sometimes violent, action; from subtle and complex attempts to control a work process, to immediate forceful responses to a brutal supervisor in concrete terms, some potential workers refused or tried to refuse construction work; some workers joined and then exited; others stayed and gave voice to protest through a variety of methods ranging from petitions and peaceful refusal to accept a new tool, to the more vehement voice of the strike or physical confrontation”<sup>17</sup>. It should be noted that before the traditional unionization, the workers adopted traditional forms of protest where strikes remained comparatively rare. Workers’ participation in food riots could be illustrated here. On Christmas Day of 1876, railroad labourers looted the bazaars in Cuddalore, South Arcot, when the grain prices increased and their payment was in arrears. In the food riots and looting in Madras presidency in the second half of 1918 the railway workers at Arkonam, North Arcot, and Nagappattinam were the principal participants. Another important technique of protest was ‘train-wrecking’ – the sabotage of railroad tracks by the removal of rails and fish-plates or the placing of obstructions across the lines. Generally the aggrieved rail men used this technique of protest to put pressure on the management for their wrongful decision. The gang men or plate layers who lived in villages alongside the tracks, showed their protest in this way. This was a protest of semi-proletarianized section of the rail workers<sup>18</sup>. Their protest was not for the new demands, such as higher wages or shorter hours, but to protect existing work practices, established wage levels and hours of work. In 1899, there was a strike of the signaling staff of the G.I.P. Railway which is now known as the central Railway<sup>19</sup>.

### III

To express their grievances and meet their demand the other technique which they adopted was railway strike. The first strike of the industrial workers of India occurred in the railways. The railway labourers of Howrah Railway Station demanded 8 hours work a day. Therefore they went on a strike in April – May 1862. About 1200 labourers participated in this strike. About this strike, the Bengali newspaper, *Somprakash* (5 May, 1862) wrote – recently 1200 workers of Howrah Railway Station have struck work. They say that the workers of Locomotive Department work 8 hours’ a day. But they have to work 10 hours. Work has been stopped for some days. The railway company should fulfil the prayers of workers; otherwise they won’t get any man. Though the strike was not highly organized but it should be noted that it was the first strike since the

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introduction of railways in India. In 1905 the railway working class numbered about 450,000. Among the strike movements the strike of the East India Railways (E.I.R) in July 1906 was important as they protested against discriminatory wage and oppression of the management. At that time nationalist interest and strike was supported by the Bengali Hindu station-master, clerks of the East India Railway. It was written in the Bengalle newspaper, “what, for instance, can be more unfair than this, that while the maximum pay of a first-class native station master is to be only RS 45 per month, the minimum pay of a Eurasian employee with a minimum responsibility is to be RS 50 and that of a Eurasian station master, who has less work and less responsibility than a native station master, is to be RS 200. So long as such racial discriminations are made, it is not possible for the native staff to be contented and we desire to tell the agent that the native staff will not submit to such gross injustice”<sup>20</sup>. The station – master of Konnagar station, named Surendranath Mukherji raised question of racial discrimination and was supported by the station-master of Hooghly, Nrityagopal Bhattacharya. Beside this they had other grievances too – (1) there was no right way for promotion. (2) The men in the parcels department were often harassed by false cases instituted at the alleged instigation of the railway police. This kind of discrimination raised the grievances among the native staffs of Howrah. The strikers paralysed the railway traffic in eastern region. But the Eurasian guards and drivers did not support the strike. On 24 July it was written on the Sandhya newspaper that every effort should be taken to make the strike successful. The Railway Men’s Union had been formed on July 27, 1906. Bipin Chandra Paul, Shyamsundar Chakraborty and A.K.Ghosh addressed the strikers on various issues. ‘*Bandemataram*’ was shouted in the meeting. On Sunday July 29 a public meeting was held at Pantir Math (16 Cornwallis Street). C.R.Das presided over the meeting. Bipin Chandra Paul said, “this public meeting of the citizens of Calcutta hereby expresses its hearty sympathy with the strikers on the East India Railway as it thinks that they should hold on until their grievances are substantially redressed and that those who have not as yet joined the strike should do so in view of the important issues, both personal and national, involved in this struggle”<sup>21</sup>. In a secret meeting held at Asansol and Calcutta, the coolies were requested to join the strikers. Political leaders also wanted to make the strike successful and grab the situation for political issue. Surendra Nath Banerji in a letter to A.C.Banerji dated 21 August 1906 declared: “we are doing our best in connection with the railway strike. I don’t know how far we shall succeed.” He also made an arrangement for the fare of the muslim agitator Abul Hossain up to Asansol. To organize the



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strike more actively, a branch of the union was formed at Asansol on August 4, 1906. Many well known personalities like Premotosh Bose, A.K.Ghose and Leaqt Hossain came forward to provide leadership to the strikers. They tried to organize workers at the railway centre of Asansol, Ranigung, Jamalpur and Sahibgung and convinced them to join the railway union in order to make the strike successful. Several meetings were held at many places and in the meeting it was advised to boycott English goods. A.K.Ghosh condemned the government action of helping the company by sending armed police. About 900 employees of Asansol demanded- equal pay for Indian and white foremen, 50 per cent wage increase for workshop workers and grain compensation allowance. The union also set up its branches at Jamalpur where a union meeting was held on 27 August. The management wanted to prevent the workers from attending the union meeting. This led to a riot by the 10,000 coolies and they refused to work. The clerks also joined with them with a fear that their inactiveness could be resulted injured of their families and burnt of their houses by the infuriated coolies. The situation became worsened followed by a weeklong lock-out at the workshop. On 6 September the coolies resumed their work but they remained stick to their demand. At the same time another strike started at the Asansol region. All the clerks especially from the locomotive department joined the strike. At that time the traffic department gave gratuities of Re 1 and Rs 2 so that the menials remained absent from joining the strike. The European employees had taken up aggressive attitude towards the Indian strikers who were brought under cases for not performing their duties. In this situation A.C.Banerji took charge of the Asansol strike. He tried to boost up the morale of the stricker in a series of meting, ignoring the danger and threat from the Anglo-Indians. It was also decided to form a new membership of the union with personalities like Surendranath Banerji as president, Krishnakumar Mitra, Prabhatkusum Roychaudhuri as secretaries, Bhupendranath Bose as treasurer and Rabindranath Tagore as vicepresident of all persons.<sup>22</sup> But A.K.Ghosh and Premtosh Bose objected this set up of the union. With this confusion among leaders, the strike itself died down. Many employees of the Howrah and Asansol sections lost their jobs, the management had taken repressive measure against the striker; and leaders were brought under cases. In September 1906 another strike occurred at the Bengal-Nagpur Railway workshop of Kharagpur. The strike continued for three days from 4 to 6 September. The main causes of this strike were- high price of rice at the local bazaar, and not paying any allowance for the increase of price. The strike was quiet successful and the number of participant when it lasted was 300 out of 5,000 on 5 September. The use of

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religious sentiments was interesting- on 3 September “the ringleaders influenced a sufficient number of workmen to support their declaration that no one was to attend work the following day under the penalty, in the case of Hindus of being made to eat cow’s meat and, in the case of Muhammedans, pig’s flesh.”<sup>23</sup> The authorities did not grant them any grain allowance but made private arrangement in order to keep down the price of rice. On 16 October another strike broke out at the East Bengal State Railway workshop at Beliaghata. About 300 workers were demanding extra puja allowances in a time when the price of foodstuffs increased rapidly. All efforts were taken but organization deficiency led to the failure of this historical strike. Many workers and employees were dismissed from their services. But this strike no doubt inspired the later movement of railway workers.

### **Conclusion**

Railway authority realized that workers could be the best driving forces for the railways in India. Plentiful of workers and their low wages made it easier in construction of railways in India. But engagements of workers were done on racial and communal basis. The railway employees were from different caste and communities. It was done intentionally so that no one caste could dominate the railways. “The multiple divisions of Indian society coupled to the complex occupational and grade distinctions of the permanent railway workforce did provide a fertile ground for the application of divide and manage tactics”<sup>24</sup>. The workers were politically and economically exploited by the management. Sometime their collective action against the brutality of the management reflected their growing consciousness under the new circumstances of capitalism. They were not organized at the initial phase and unskilled in construction activities. In many occasion their confrontation with the European contractors led to increase their sentiments against the colonial rule. Their techniques of protest were also changing with the evolving of time. Their mind through the work was entering from ‘known to unknown’ habit. All this was happening because of the introduction of railways in India. Therefore the railways should rightly be called the harbinger of modern workers in India.

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