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Introduction

On 18 June 1920, cultivators in the Chai and Fakria areas of Bhagalpur congregated in vast numbers at Jhanjhara. Aggrieved and desperate, they stressed how in the last few years the high and poorly drained embankments of the Bengal and North-Western Railway had converted the regular and seasonable floods that occurred in the area into catastrophic ones. In 1917, the Ganges flood had breached the railway line at Mansi and Mahadeopur Ghat stations and left several villages submerged in six to nine feet of water. As a result, 'hundreds of lives' were lost, cattle died, and property was destroyed. Despite repeated appeals, little had been done to increase the inadequate waterways provided in railway embankments.[1]

Roughly at the same time but hundreds of miles west, a shopkeeper in Gujranwala was hoping that railway timetables would help alibi him against charges of treason.[2] Under section 121 of the Indian Penal Code, a martial law tribunal had accused Jagannath of fomenting agitation and inciting violence in the town between 12 and 14 April 1919. In his defence, Jagannath pointed out that it was impossible for him to have committed the crimes that he was being accused of for he had left Gujranwala on 12 April by the 5 p.m. train

[1] Chai and Fakria Parganas Combined Tenants' Conference, 18 June 1920, no. IP-3 of 1919, PWD: Railway: A, Bihar and Orissa Prog., IOR.P/10744, British Library (BL), London.

[2] M.K. Gandhi, 'Jagannath's Case,' *Young India*, 30 July 1919, reproduced in M.K. Gandhi, *Law and the Lawyers*, compiled and edited by S.B. Kher (Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1962), 170–74.

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en route to Kathiawar. Further, railway timetables unequivocally proved that he could not have been physically present in Gujranwala after 6 p.m. on 13 April. The *foujdar* of Dhoraji could testify to his being present there on 16 April and even the fastest train from Delhi took 44 hours to reach Dhoraji.

At first glance, much distinguishes these two accounts from each other. One details the distress engendered by unseasonable flooding in Bhagalpur while the other recounts the legal travails of a shopkeeper from Gujranwala. Yet these two experiences are, in fact, part of the same historical story: one that explores how railway travel, technology, and infrastructure became palpably present in the everyday lives of Indians. Of course, neither Bhagalpur's peasants nor Jagannath were the first in colonial India to experience the increasing presence of railways in their lives; by the time we encounter them railways had become quite ubiquitous. Figures for 1919–20 show that in that single assessment year alone, 520 million passengers travelled across a railway network stretching to more than 36,000 miles.[3] The significance of these numbers is heightened by the fact that the 1921 census estimated India's population at 318 million.[4] It is equally true that neither railways nor railway travel spread either instantly or evenly across the country. In 1854, the first year that railways were open to passengers, only 0.5 million people travelled on the limited 35 miles of track open, all of it concentrated in Bombay Presidency.[5] However, both the number of railway passengers and the extent of country covered by railways grew continuously in the 1860s and, from the 1870s onwards, quite remarkably. By 1875, the length of track had expanded to over 6,500 miles and the annual number of passengers had increased to 26 million.[6] By 1900, these same numbers had increased exponentially to around 25,000 miles and 175 million passengers, respectively.[7]

These figures suggest that from the mid- to late-nineteenth century onwards, increasing numbers of Indians felt the ever-increasing presence of

[3] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1910–11 to 1919–20* (London: HMSO, 1922), 138–44.

[4] Ibid., 252 (Appendix D—Population Census of 1921).

[5] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1840 to 1865* (London: HMSO, 1867), 58.

[6] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1867/8 to 1876/7* (London: HMSO, 1878), 88–90.

[7] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1894–95 to 1903–04* (London: HMSO, 1905), 138–40.

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railways in their lives. Further, that like millions of people across the globe, they were gradually but inexorably compelled to negotiate the substantial transformations being wrought by this new technology. Passengers were the most immediately and visibly affected but they were not the only ones. Even at a glance, railway tracks, embankments, and crossings reshaped familiar landscapes; railway construction was increasingly correlated with miasma and ill-health; towns and villages alongside well-frequented railway lines began to be seen as particularly susceptible to epidemic contagion; train timetables announced new formats of organizing and comprehending both railway and civil time; and railway stations became the foci of popular politics and dissent as much as spaces for commerce and exchange.

In this context, this book asks how railway technology, travel, and infrastructure became increasingly and inextricably woven with everyday life in colonial India, how people negotiated this increasing presence of railways in their lives, and how the ensuing processes of adaptation, contestation, and accommodation have materially shaped India's history. In colonial India, railways became integral to how inordinate numbers concretely experienced many of the historical abstractions shaping their contemporary world, specifically the intrusion of a new and alien technology structured through the demands of capitalist expansion and imperial dominance. However, even as millions found it impossible to ignore the increasing presence of railways, they also sought to inhabit the ensuing changes in ways that accommodated their specific needs. This was as true of a cultivator who destroyed a railway embankment that trapped rainwater and flooded crops, as of the shopkeeper who tried to used railway timetables to establish a legal alibi; as true of the passenger avoiding medical inspection by alighting a few miles ahead of her destination, as of the one who gained access to a racially exclusive retiring room by donning a hat and changing his name from Jnanamuttu to John Matthew. Consequently, everyday life became a space of daily and continuous negotiation between people and the new technology that permeated their lives. It was where popular needs, actions, and experiences engaged with the structural power of technology and where colonial society shaped its historical present, both individually and collectively.

In arguing for the importance of railways in people's lives, questions of continuity and change are important. First, imperial claims notwithstanding, railways did not introduce travel in India. A range of scholarship has established that varied networks of mobility and patterns of circulation existed in precolonial India, not only before railways but also well before any of the

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massive communication projects undertaken by the colonial state.[8] Second, scholars looking at the nineteenth century have emphasized how railways should be situated 'amidst the existing patterns and networks of circulation in which the role of roads and ferries was crucial.'[9] Some emphasize the complementarity of multiple modes of travel and transport—often in the same journey—while others stress the competition among these. Thus, in his study of nineteenth-century Awadh, Robert Varady demonstrates the competition that roads posed to the railway line that opened in 1867, not only in relation to passengers but also merchandise and livestock; in contrast, Ravi Ahuja describes how the 'transport revolution' of railways and steamships 'superimposed itself upon older patterns of land and water transport, rather than superseding them altogether,' while Nitin Sinha shows the intertwining of travel mechanisms when discussing how colonial-administrative practices of touring 'used a variety of means of transport—horses, palanquins, boats, steamships and not least railways.'[10]

Recognizing such continuities is important to historicizing communication patterns in colonial India: as scholars have cautioned, the history of transport in the nineteenth century is not simply the history of railways.[11] In many areas, railway links were only completed in the closing decades of the century; even where railways were built earlier, they became part of existing networks of

[8] Kumkum Chatterjee writes that while the 'Bengali middle-class' travelled for multiple reasons, 'pilgrimage was probably the motive for long-distance, cross regional travel inside India.' 'Discovering India: Travel, History and Identity in Late-Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century India,' in Daud Ali, ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 197. In contrast, discussing eastern India, Nitin Sinha argues that the Company-state was 'well aware of' a diverse group of mobile people and groups who were not travelling for purposes of pilgrimage. *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India, Bihar: 1760s–1880s* (London and New York: Anthem, 2012). For a discussion of circulation networks between 1750 and 1950 see Claude Markovitz, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). Ravi Ahuja discusses conceptual differences between mobility and circulation in his *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, Public Works and Social Space in Colonial Orissa, c. 1780–1914* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), 69–74.

[9] Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 5, 39; Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism*, xx–xxi.

[10] Robert Varady, Rail and Road Transport in Nineteenth Century Awadh: Competition in a North Indian Province, unpublished PhD. dissertation, University of Arizona, 1981, quotes on 73–75; Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 39; Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism*, xx–xxi, xxx, Chapter 3.

[11] Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 6.

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communication. At the same time, it is equally vital to delineate the increasing importance of railways both in and to people's lives. Thus, even as he describes how roads competed with railways in Awadh, Varady also documents that in the 20 years after the railway line opened, its earnings increased 'roughly thirty-fold from £22,000 to nearly £665,000.'[12] Similarly, discussing eastern India, Sinha recognizes that: 'Undeniably, from the 1860s a stable and clear policy was evolving that kept railways in the centre of the emerging communications grid, followed by four types or categories of roads, devised to connect the "interiors" with the nodes of railway communication.'[13] The disproportionate focus on developing railways is also documented in Ahuja's study of colonial Orissa, where he points out that while government expenditure on roads was estimated at £1.5 million per year in the three decades before 1889, the capital expenditure on railways 'amounted to an annual average of almost £4 million between 1849–50 and 1878–79.'[14] Even as they document the colonial state's increasing interest in railway infrastructure, the figures also suggest the growing *material* presence of railways in colonial India and in the lives of its population.

Railways and the everyday

As Indians embraced the speed of railway transport in numbers far beyond what colonial authorities had expected, the daily details and routines of being passengers became integral to simultaneously homogenizing and stratifying social relations in colonial society. Nearly 90 per cent of Indians could afford only the third or lowest class of travel, whose discomforts and indignities exposed them collectively to the intertwined structures of capitalist profit, colonial control, and state paternalism that determined the concrete shape of technological change on the ground. Passenger experiences certainly differed, for railway companies varied in size, capital outlay, the combination of private and state ownership through which each was controlled, and the local conditions under which lines operated. However, railway policy and law were centrally constituted and, differences notwithstanding, significant aspects of third-class travel remain comparable.

[12] Varady, Rail and Road Transport in Nineteenth Century Awadh, 73–75.

[13] Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism*, xxxiv.

[14] Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 96–97. Further that between 1880–81 and 1897–98, investment in railways was Rs 1,925 million, 'as opposed to the Rs 988 million in roads and building' (97).

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Chapter 1 explores those conditions that defined everyday travel for ordinary Indians across region and railway line: the limited sitting space and rampant overcrowding that characterized third-class travel; the discomfort generated by the fact that, until the early 1900s, hardly any third-class carriages were provided with lavatories; the inability of third-class passengers to leave their carriages at intervening stops, whether to use the facilities or to procure food and water; and the use of insanitary goods wagons to transport people, many of whom had paid for third-class tickets. Such routine discomforts and indignities, especially when shared across regions and continuing across decades, meant that for large numbers of Indians negotiating technological change and negotiating colonialism often resided in the *same* experience of third-class travel. Railway and state officials were adamant that such discomfort did not result from any structural paucity of amenities but instead that it was caused by the physiological and psychological 'peculiarities' of third-class passengers themselves. Thus, despite repeated complaints and appeals, many of these conditions persisted. At the same time, the collective demographic strength of third-class passengers made them a critical political constituency whom neither the colonial state nor the emerging nationalist one could afford to ignore.

While shared conditions—and difficulties—created a distinct affinity among third-class passengers, the aggregation of people in railway space generated unprecedented opportunities for proximity and contact. Chapter 2 examines how anxiety about unregulated proximity, whether in railway compartments and carriages or in retiring and refreshment rooms, generated minute conversations about inclusion and exclusion: who could or could not sit next to whom; whose bodies were not permitted to come into contact with whose; which railway spaces would be reserved for which groups of people; who would eat where, who would serve them, and what food would they be served. Such conversations sparked demands for exclusive reserved spaces that were justified through a mobile and layered set of arguments: combining social and religious proscriptions on physical contact with narratives of hygiene and sanitation as well as with claims of privilege premised on wealth and status. Colonial officials and railway functionaries were quite sympathetic to demands that food, water, and spaces of commensality be organized around caste and religious difference. However, they were less amenable to demands that railway carriages be similarly differentiated, dismissing this as being logistically unviable (while using the very fact that such demands existed to justify racially-based privilege in railway spaces). Irrespective of whether exclusionary demands were aimed at maintaining a privileged position in colonial society or at securing creature comforts during railway travel, the fractious public conversations and

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legal confrontations that ensued from them compelled millions of railway passengers—and hence colonial society at large—to grapple with fundamental questions about inclusion and exclusion on a daily basis.

After exploring how daily routines of railway travel affected people, the next three chapters examine how the process of building and coordinating India's vast railway network changed the everyday environment in colonial India. Not many could remain insensible to such changes: even if one never boarded a train, one was faced with vastly altered landscapes, new forms of measuring, organizing, and scheduling time, and swiftly changing channels through which contagion now spread. Those whose property had been commandeered for railway construction—from surveys to preparing the permanent way, as well as allied activities like brick making or housing workmen—were affected before railway travel actually materialized. As more and more of the permanent way was laid, people across the country found their physical surroundings altered by thousands of miles of track, interspersed with signals, crossings, gates, bridges, and embankments. Neither were these changes only visual. Instead, as Chapter 3 argues, structures like railway embankments had a material impact on people's lives and livelihoods. Similar to other parts of the world, railway companies in India utilized embankments as a cost-effective mechanism for dealing with substantial changes in gradient as well as for laying tracks across low-lying, deltaic areas with uneven terrain. However, problems arose when railway companies built high embankments without providing adequate drainage outlets for the rain and floodwater that these structures trapped. The height of the embankment blocked old drainage patterns without providing new ones and converted seasonable flooding that used to be beneficial for cultivation into calamitous events that destroyed lives, crops, and property. Facing repeated losses, many sought redress; more often than not, however, they found themselves marginalized by the needs of railway construction, with arguments about 'public improvement' effacing the human cost of such undertakings.

Other everyday negotiations elicited by railways were no less substantive even if some were less explicitly adversarial. Chapter 4 traces how in the half-century between 1854 and 1905 the time of a single meridian was standardized as supra-local railway time, synchronized with the time of the Greenwich meridian in England, and then deemed civil time (continuing as India's national time). Standardized railway time was spawned by the needs of coordinating safe interchange between multiple, intersecting, railway networks spread across India's longitudinal breadth. However, the fact that railway time was gradually mandated as civil (and national) time meant that it permeated

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the daily lives and routines of more than just railway passengers. Thus, train schedules, railway timetables, and station clocks were not merely the technical instruments that railway passengers needed on an everyday basis. Instead, they became artefacts that influenced and changed everyday understandings of time, speed, and mobility among the colonized population at large, whether these were expressed in wide-ranging demands for train schedules to better reflect people's daily routines or in nostalgic laments that the speed of railways had erased the sensory excitement of journeying on foot. Significantly, while reified ideas of colonial (and metropolitan) time-sense informed the discussions and decisions of the colonial state, the ways in which people in colonial India actually apprehended temporal standardization remained analogous to similar processes in different parts of the world.

While the speed of railway travel compressed distance, it simultaneously expanded the purview of other influences, not least that of disease. Chapter 5 examines how a widening network of trains and tracks began to be linked with the spread of contagious diseases and with facilitating the epidemic spread of cholera and plague. Epidemic outbreaks during fairs, festivals, and pilgrimages were said to be aggravated by the frequently unhygienic conditions of railway travel as well as the fact that railways substantially increased the number of people who could congregate at each event. Even those who did not travel could not ignore what trains brought—disembarking passengers were associated with the entry of contagious diseases into areas far from centres of contagion. At the same time, some among India's medical and sanitary establishment repudiated the suggestion that diseases like cholera travelled through channels of communication; significantly, however, they argued their case by correlating the timing, spread, and intensity of epidemics with the presence or absence of railway links in various areas. Meanwhile, railway infrastructure itself began to be used to contain the spread of other diseases like plague, saving the state from the commercial and financial consequences of invoking general quarantine. Instead, thousands of railway passengers faced a web of preventive surveillance, being medically examined and possibly detained, as well as having their belongings inspected, cleaned, or destroyed. Some tried to evade this intrusion, which remained severest towards third-class passengers, the poor, and the itinerant. However, the perceived success of such surveillance encouraged colonial India's medical and sanitary establishment to suggest it as a routine mechanism of control, not only over health and disease but also over popular mobility.

After examining how few could ignore the palpable changes wrought by railways in their immediate environment—physical, temporal, and

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epidemiological—Chapters 6 and 7 together examine how railways and railway spaces lay at the heart of military control, political action, and dissent in colonial India. Chapter 6 explores how railways were viewed as being qualitatively different from other, previous forms of military links, their potential for swift transport seen to overcome challenges not only of distance but also of disease and seasonality. The state's ensuing anxiety about protecting railway links was reflected in the increasingly severe penalties prescribed for any interference with railways; this same anxiety, however, generated space for railway sabotage as a form of both public protest and political action. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, interfering with or sabotaging railway property became a way for people not only to draw administrative attention to their immediate needs and complaints or to settle local jealousies and conflicts but also part of more organized forms of anti-colonial radicalism. However, even as railway sabotage became a mechanism to challenge imperial control, train journeys themselves became a staple part of planning and executing it, its organizers relying—much like the state itself did—on the regular, uninterrupted, and timely functioning of railways.

Moving from sabotage to mass politics, Chapter 7 explores how colonial India's trains, platforms, and stations became everyday spaces central to popular action. Nationalist elites used railways to engender mass support, physically transporting themselves and their ideas of *satygraha* across India; at the same time, railway spaces were also where popular radicalism challenged elite dictates about the content and limits of political action. Thus, while crowded train doorways, politically tense railway platforms, and burnt signal rooms certainly marked the nation reclaiming railways from imperial control, yet railway spaces were notoriously contingent, being as amenable to nationalist rituals and collections as to the making of 'rogues,' as some less than obedient *satyagrahi*s were described in an elite lexicon. To maintain control over mass action, nationalist elites sought to exclude such dissident acts from the purview of nationalism, ousting those who sabotaged railway infrastructure from the bounds of *swaraj* itself. Thus, how one deployed railways became central to distinguishing citizen from denizen, a process acutely visible in 1947–48, when railway trains became the vehicle in which millions experienced their past and future being sundered from each other.

Everyday life and the state

In exploring how people encountered, navigated, and refashioned railways, I use 'everyday' in its most colloquial sense—as a space of continuous, daily,

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negotiation between people and the technology that permeates their lives.[15] At the same time, the book relies upon critical insights addressing two specific concerns. The first stresses how everyday life is indispensable to retrieving as historical and political subjects those who have been deemed anonymous, silent, and subordinate. The second pertains to understanding use or 'consumption' as simultaneously productive and transgressive, encompassing a range of tactics through which people actively inhabit (or consume) the abstractions that they are confronted with, whether technology or infrastructure. Most immediately, these concerns inform much of the work done by scholars of the Subaltern School as well as those invested in the study of *Alltag* or everyday life.[16] Neither need introduction but their methodological influence is succinctly captured in Dorothee Wierling's description of *Alltag* as the domain in which people 'exercise a direct influence—via their behaviour—and on their immediate circumstances.'[17] Equally relevant is the assertion that *Alltag* 'is not limited to the so-called basic facts of human existence; it is more than the routine of daily labor; it is not just private or shaped by "small" events.'[18] On the one hand, this allows for the purview of *Alltag* to extend beyond the domain

[15] In his *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), David Arnold explores the 'small' everyday machines that people negotiate with on a daily basis—from bicycles to typewriters—and their importance to how Indians both understood and constituted 'modernity' in the colonial context. David Arnold and Erich deWald also stress how 'everyday technology' illuminates inner histories and local narratives. See their 'Everyday Technology in South and Southeast Asia: An Introduction,' in *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 1 (January 2012): 1–17.

In contrast, Gyan Prakash and Kevin Kruse use 'everyday' to depict 'a distinct space of routines produced and governed by modernity.' *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginary Politics and Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 12.

[16] A significant part of the seminal work of Subaltern Studies' scholars resides in the multi-volume *Writings on South Asian History & Society* published by Oxford University Press from 1982 onwards. The emphasis on studying the everyday is discussed in Alf Ludtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (translated by William Templer, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[17] Dorothee Wierling, 'The History of Everyday Life and Gender Relations: On Historical and Historiographical Relationships,' in Ludtke, *History of Everyday Life*, 150–51.

[18] Wierling, 'The History of Everyday Life,' 150.

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