



REFLECTION OF COLONIAL INTEREST OF FATHER OF INDIAN RAILWAYS

Dr. Madhumita Bandyopadhyay

Associate Professor, Smt.P.N.Doshi College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai.

Abstract:

The railways serve as an important means of communication. It was introduced in India around the mid-nineteenth century. The primary purpose for the British to set up railways in India was to serve their own needs-political, administrative, military and economic. An exhaustive “Minute” scripted by Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of East India Company (1848-1856), popularly known as the Father of Indian Railways, on 20 April, 1853, made a detailed commentary on the colonial interests in railways. This paper attempts to analyze the colonial outlook of the British towards the building of the railway, taking the comprehensive Minute by Dalhousie as an illustration. The paper presents a detailed discussion of its contents with a view to highlight the imperialist designs for the building of the railways. Also it unfolds the colonial character of the railway (a technological method) that made India an economic appendage of England and another effective “colonial adjunct of the British metropolis.”

Keywords: *Railways, Dalhousie, Minute, Colonial character, Imperialistic Designs*

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Railways remain one of the most important technological innovations. What makes an innovation significant is the extent to which it sways the whole pattern of economic life. And in this respect, the railroad is a class by itself. Occupying a unique position in the history of capitalism, it absorbed enormous amount of capital constituting between 40 to 50 percent of the total private capital formation during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century. It thus exceeded investment in all manufacturing industries combined. This agglomeration of investment in one industry is surely incomparable at any time before or since.¹

Railroad construction was a secured place for investment of the excessive glut of capital that was formed from the early industrialization phase. India being a British colony was drawn into the vortex of European industrialization by the joint stock companies investing in its railways. And when such construction was to be done in its colonies, guarantees for secured interest on the capital was extended by the colonial government.

The railway was one of the agencies through which the apparatus of the colonial state was put into operation. Reiterating the colonial nature of the railways, A.R. Desai, in his work, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, very rightly observes:

” The modern means of transport were established and extended not from the point of view of the free, normal, all-sided development of the economic, social, political and cultural life of the Indian nation, but primarily to serve the economic, political and military interests of Britain in India. This lent a colonial character to the Indian transport



system...”ⁱⁱ

Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General (1848-1856), who bears the epithet of “Father of Indian Railways”, made a mark by his efforts in initiating railways in India. Two of his “Minutes” are important from the point of view of railways. His first Minute on “Introduction of Railways in India”, which he submitted to the Court of Directors of East India Company on 4 July 1850, only out-lines the necessity of constructing railways from Calcutta to other parts, something that was desired by his superiors in London. ⁱⁱⁱ However, it is his second exhaustive Minute dated, 20 April 1853 which is an important document explicitly stating a detailed commentary on the colonial interests in railways. In fact, he categorically states that the railway was calculated to increase the power of the state and promote its interests.^{iv} This paper attempts to analyze the colonial outlook of the British towards the building of the railway, taking the comprehensive Minute by Dalhousie as an illustration. It presents a detailed discussion of its contents with a view to highlight the imperialist designs for the building of the railways.

As a methodological tool, an attempt is made to understand the colonial outlook of Dalhousie’s Minute from the perspective of interpretation of colonialism made by four scholars. The first interpretation is that by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy where he defines colonialism as a “hierarchy of nations” consisting of “a complex set of exploitative relations”, the second is that of Gyan Prakash where he shows how the British opened India to capital in nineteenth century as a “cultural authority” established through “new language of knowledge and rule”, the third is that of Bernard Cohn, who emphasize colonialism as an invasion on the epistemological space and the last is that of Edward Said, who highlights how colonialism was justified through its civilizing mission. It is perhaps important to state here that the applications itself is very precise, for not all components of what these theorists outlined have been applied in this article.

It is imperative to discuss the system of railways as visualized by Dalhousie and put in practice by the British government. The East India Company guaranteed five percent of interest for a period of ninety-nine years on the British capital raised by the companies. This policy was clearly enunciated by Lord Dalhousie in his ‘Minute’ of 1853, for he felt sure that the profits from railway operations in India would far outgrow the interest paid on the British capital by the railway companies. However, he also insisted on maximum economy in their construction. Emphasizing the utilitarian character of the Indian railways he writes: “There is every reason to believe that that in India the cost of railway per mile will probably, on the average, be less than the cheapest of the lines constructed in England.....that Railway Engineers shall consult the utmost economy in their works consistent with security and efficiency, and shall sell the cost neither by useless ornament nor by superfluous solidity.”^v Therefore Lord Dalhousie directed the erection of a grid of public works to build an integrated, secured and profitable colony.

Paul A. Baran and Paul M.Sweezy in their work *Monopoly Capital*, vividly analyses the working of the colonialism. As a feature of the capitalist system they consider colonialism to be a “hierarchy of nations” consisting of “a complex set of exploitative relations.” Those at the top of the hierarchy are named by him as “metropolies” who exploit the units at the bottom whom he calls as “colonies”. There is a secondary level of nations who constitute the rivals to the metropolies against whom the latter competes to maintain its position.



The sphere of exploitation of a given metropolis from which rivals are more or less effectively excluded is its “empire”. Thus we have a network of antagonistic relations pitching exploiters against exploited and rival exploiters against each other. With a need to improve their positions in the exploitative hierarchy all nations—except the dependent and defenceless ones need to maintain an armed force, the strength of which depended upon its position in the hierarchy as a whole at that particular time. Leading nations would always require most, to maintain the top position, while the needs of the secondary nations would vary from time to time, especially depending on their ability to make a protective alliance with one or more of the contenders for leadership.^{vi}

This schema can be well illustrated in Dalhousie’s Minute. As pointed out by Paul Baron and Paul Sweezy, Lord Dalhousie considered the military benefits to be of utmost importance for a colonial empire. He was in fact so overwhelmed by the impending political and military benefits resulting from the expansion of railway network that he chose to state those in order first and emphasized its importance more than the others. Stressing the need for a railway for serving the military needs of the British Empire, both to maintain its power in India as well as to put down the rival forces he writes:

“A single glance cast upon the map recalling to mind the vast extent of the empire we hold; the various classes and interests it includes; the wide distance which separate the several points at which hostile attack may at anytime be expected; the perpetual risk of such hostility appearing in quarters where it is the least expected; the expenditure of time, of treasure, and of life, that are involved in even the ordinary routine of Military movements over such a tract, and the comparative handful of men scattered over its surface, who have been the conquerors of the country, and now hold it in subjection, a single glance upon these things will suffice to show how immeasurable are the political advantages to be derived from a system of internal communication which would admit of full intelligence of every event being transmitted to the Government under-all circumstances, at a speed exceeding five-folds its present rate and would enable the Government to bring the main bulk of its Military strength to bear upon any given point in as many days as it would now require....”

Importantly, he also mentions in the ‘Minute’ that the railway venture would not only facilitate a rapid movement of troops but such a feature would consequently reduce the military numerically without diminishing its strength. This in turn would reduce the expenditure on maintaining huge military force at various places, the burden of which was then placed on the local native populace.

Weighing the pros and cons of the various lines of railways proposed for construction, he reflects on the military utility of all. He was keen on a general system of railways, connecting the several Presidencies, and constituting the great trunk lines within them. He strongly recommends the construction of a line from Calcutta to the North-West Provinces, connecting Allahabad, Lahore and reaching upto Attock. The main motive for its construction was protection from probable attacks from Kabul frontier and borders of Nepal. He was particularly apprehensive of an invasion by Kabul due to probable “instigation” by a European.

Regarding the proposal of a line from Bombay via Baroda to Agra, he strongly recommends its construction as he says that the “military power of the Government of India would be incalculably advanced thereby.” It would



be worthwhile to note what Lord Dalhousie had to state about Bombay as the nodal port and its railway linkages with the central Indian parts. Geographically as well as strategically Bombay provided a safe port, namely, it did not have the geographical woes which the deltaic Calcutta port had, nor did it have any prospects of danger from ‘foreign frontier’ troubles. The Presidency of Bombay, in his opinion had no foreign frontier except Sindh, and besides, Nizam as foreign potentate had turned helpless and Rajput States had become too submissive to the English military power. Bombay as port-city was also closer to west-ward sea-borne transport via Suez, Alexandria and through the Mediterranean. However, he expected the line to offer security to Bengal, which in his opinion was more prone to foreign attacks. By annihilating distances separating the two armies it could thus provide advantages of mutual co-operation. The line would also facilitate the landing of regiments sent from England to India, who could then descend at Bombay port, providing the advantage of a shorter voyage than that of Calcutta and also avoiding the unsuitable weather conditions at Karachi.

The Madras Presidency, in Dalhousie’s opinion faced no dangers of foreign invasions and was well secured. However, since a large force stood there isolated from the rest of India, its communication with Bombay by railway was expected to increase the military power of the British Government through prompt and concentrated action.^{vii}

The second interpretation that is presented in this paper is that of Gyan Prakash as stated in his work, *Another Reason: Science and Imagination of Modern India*. He traces the beginning of the introduction of railways in India to the “cultural authority” introduced by the British in the early nineteenth century. As the East India Company firmly established its territorial control, it gradually developed a paradigm shift from traders to rulers, with a purpose of developing and exploiting the maximum resources of the territory. Bringing in the “new language of knowledge and rule”, the Company gave away its Oriental classicism and launched cultural authority in India through science. With the aid of science and technology they brought India under their rule. They set up a network of modern infrastructures connecting economically the unified territory of India with the global capitalist economy. Infrastructures like railways and telegraphs were extended rapidly to strengthen their hold over the vast expanse of India and at the same time opened it to capital.^{viii}

Keeping in mind the need to sustain the economic needs of the British empire, as put forth by Gyan Prakash, Dalhousie was unequivocal enough to emphasize the economic necessity of railways.

“...England is calling aloud for the cotton India does already produce in some degree, and would produce sufficient in quality, and plentiful in quantity, if only there 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....”

The Governor General also distinctly mentions that a network of railways would facilitate the colonial state to exploit the rich produce and the ‘mineral wealth’ of various districts. A line from Calcutta to Allahabad would open out the opium districts, and meet the trade of the Narmada valley at Mirzapur, its chief emporium through which the railway would traverse.^{ix} Specifically appreciating the viability of the BB & CIR route between Bombay and the northern Indian parts through Central India, he did not forget to mention in the ‘Minute’ about



opium of Malwa and Ujjain region, the coal-fields of Baitool and Bewas of the Narmada valley and also the productive resources of the extensive and fertile valley. Appreciating the railways for conveying the goods to the far-flung markets of the hinterland, he welcomes the line, as goods could then be conveyed from England directly and faster to Bombay as compared to that from Calcutta. It also had an edge over the Karachi route as this route was closed during the monsoons.

However, while considering the economic interests, Dalhousie was not keen to support those lines that did not serve the needs of the colonial government. For instance, he rejects a proposal for a railway between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour for annihilating the difficulties which the merchants faced while navigating the river between Calcutta and its mouth (navigation at Hooghly). He very categorically states that as the interests of the government would in no way be promoted by the line, it could be built privately by those whose interests were affected, without expecting a guaranteed interest from the government on the capital raised for it. This very clearly enunciates that the railway was built only to attend the imperialist needs.

Bernard S. Cohn in his seminal work *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* puts forth the view that besides political as well as territorial conquest and consolidation, the Colonial State in India was through an invasion on the epistemological space as well. In his 'Foreword' Nicholas B. Dirks advanced B.S. Cohn's premises^x:

Colonial conquest was not just the result of the power of superior arms, military organization, political power, or economic wealth – as important as these things were. Colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural technologies of rule as it was by the more obvious and brutal modes of conquest that first established power on foreign shores. The cultural effects of colonialism have too often been ignored or displaced into the inevitable logic of modernization and world capitalism; but more than this, it has not been sufficiently recognized that colonialism was itself a cultural project of control. Colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it; in certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. Cultural forms in societies newly classified as “traditional” were reconstructed and transformed by and through this knowledge, which created new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional, West and East. ... Britain set in motion transformations every bit as powerful as the better-known consequences of military and economic imperialism.”

From the above analysis one can conclude that railway was a technology, a know-how that the colonial power introduced in India with a view to strengthen their control over the colony. It altered the fabric of the Indian society. In the same breath, Dalhousie emphasizes the role of the railway in bringing infinite changes in the Indian society and economy. He holds that the great public work, although served the state, were mainly intended to be used to “keep in motion” the multifarious operations of the people including “enterprise, trade and interests of the community”. Pointing out the role of the railways for an even distribution of agricultural products all over the country he writes: “Great tracts are teeming with produce they cannot dispose of. Others are scantily bearing what they would carry in abundance, if only it could be conveyed whither it is needed.” He was sure that the Indians would gladly use the railways for conveyance of both passengers and it offered rapid, safe and easy



means of transport than the slow, risky voyage by country boat.

A very similar view is expressed by Edward Said in his work — *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. He established that there was a covert attempt by the British imperialist power to construct the “Other”, to make a qualitative difference between ‘Us’ and ‘They’. This was done with the purpose of presenting how Western institutions and traditions were superior to the Eastern while the latter was at the lowest step of civilization. Such projection of an unchanging and barbaric East justified a ‘despotic’ rule of the ‘Liberal’ Western power/ powers, to push them to more civilized stage. This was the way imperial despotic rule over Eastern civilizations was legitimized.^{xi} In this perspective it can be concluded that “Railways” which was a preserve of European knowledge was introduced with a view to emphasize the civilizing mission of the colonial power.

Highlighting the “civilizing mission” of the colonial government, Dalhousie insists that there has been complete dependence by the people on the British Government and that it was due to “its apparent helplessness to do anything for itself” that the material prosperity of the country was affected. The Governor General was however positive about the skills of the Europeans in surmounting any difficulties to facilitate the building of the railway. He assertively writes: “If there are still doubts and difficulties here, which the soil and season of India create, it may now be assumed with confidence that there are none which the skill and experience of those who are charge with the undertaking will not be able to master.”^{xii} He therefore enmeshed the idea of the British raj as a technological empire, capable of bringing nature within bounds by their engineering skill that have confronted and enslaved Indians for centuries.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion of Dalhousie’s “Minute” it may be concluded that the British took up the construction of public works with greater dynamism building up a network of technological apparatuses, institutions and practices to tighten its grip. This marked an important step of the colonial power in the exploitation of territories and its resources. The British also considered the large-scale construction schemes and engineering works such as railways and irrigation canal as testimonial to their supremacy and philanthropy. They being the symbols of British astuteness, proficiency and munificence marked the superiority of the British power. The British were the pioneers in introducing the railways in India, a work of great utility to the Indians which none of the rulers of India had earlier introduced. It thus endorsed the stereotyped rational, progressive self image of the Europeans. As Ian Kerr rightly writes in his article, *Representation and Representations of the Railways of colonial and post colonial Railways of South Asia*, “For the British the railways were the technological spearhead of their progressive, civilizing mission.... In the Indian case the railways began as a colonial project and remained colonial until 1947.... Railways were as much the substance of state power as they were the instrument of that power.”^{xiii}

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