Section II: Railway Labour Movement.

CHAPTER III: Beginnings of the Labour Agitation, 1919-1922.


CHAPTER V: Communalism and Colonial Reformism in the Labour Agitation.
CHAPTER III

Beginnings of the Labour Agitation, 1919-1922

This section is based on government files and reports and newspapers. Emphasis on general issues has tended to sidetrack the complex and rich details of the labour agitation as found in local records and in the oral tradition. Often political nuances of the railwaymen's leadership have been made the basis for generalizing about the peculiar character of the agitation. This simplification has been necessary so as to work out an argument about the railwaymen's consciousness, and political participation. Only those strikes have been discussed in detail, which have some bearing on the central hypothesis.

Response to the Presence of a Labour Aristocracy

There was a two fold response to the presence of a racialist labour aristocracy: First, a dissolution of the inherent parochial and boundaries of grade/category consciousness occurred creating conditions under which the natives in the crucial grades tended to fuse their struggle with those of the industrial proletariat of the workshops, and the lowest paid station staff. Secondly, Indian railwaymen of all categories initially fought racialism and gross discrimi-
nation by becoming active agents in popular anti-colonial agitations. In the pre-war years, the two native railwaymen's sectional strikes, of 1899 and 1907, were successful only to the extent of focusing public attention, but did not yield any substantial redress of railwaymen's grievances. In contrast, the post-war successful workshopmen's agitation, often violent, made the natives of the crucial grades realize the necessity of organizing general labour unions based on the workshopmen.

Already during the first phase of workshopmen's agitation, 1918-1920, a broad front amongst varied sections of the railway work force was in the offing. This front had the active sympathies of even higher grade Indian railway officials. It was to consist of lower subordinates, workshopmen, the coolies and gangmen, often organizing city 'toenga-wallas', 'rickshaw-pullers' and other similar workers including the factory workers. Invariably the railwaymen's agitation coincided with other anti-colonial mass movements. All category general unionism first got crystallized on the N.W.R. to be followed by M.&S.M.R., E.I.R. and G.I.P.R. This mode of agitation was not only a manifestation of the basic trade union demands — right to strike, higher wages — but represented a fundamental assertion of a people that self-organization and expression of popular sentiments were a basic right.

I Railwaymen as a part of Indian People-in-the-Making

The colonial conditions of life and work of the native rail-
waymen had fostered in them the idea of their being a colonial
people. However, at another level the railways, as an imperial
enterprise, had created an idea about itself as the imperial Levi-
athan. As an employee the railway servant was the British-Indian
railwayman, a servant of the Leviathan and its opposite — the
colonial railwaymen becoming conscious of his rights and of the
wider concept of swaraj for his country.

The railways in colonial India were the imperial enterprise
and symbolized British colonialism. In contrast the native railway-
men, its wage slaves, were asserting themselves in creating an oppos-
ing personality of Indian railwaymen. Political perspective to the
railwaymen's agitation was provided by the emerging idea of a
nation and Indians as a people.¹

This idea of the Indians as a people got crystallized through
self-perception by differential layers of the intelligentsia in the
late nineteenth century. Their comprehension that the state in
India was only an extension of a foreign state and it promoted colo-
nialism as a structure to serve the interests of the 'ferenghi' was
entirely novel. This idea was expressed by the intelligentsia
simultaneously as a critique of colonialism and the colonial state
and as a conception of India as a nation-in-the-making. Different

¹ For a general discussion of the problem in its varied aspects
see Bipan Chandra, Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in
India, 1880-1905, 1966; Also see Bipan Chandra, Amales Tripathi,
Barun De, Freedom Struggle, 1972; Bipan Chandra, Colonialism
and Nationalism in India, 1980.
social classes and groups that constituted the peoples of India lived these two inextricable moments in their real life activity. Practical critique of colonialism began to be lived by the people since the late nineteenth century in numerous forms of protest and agitations, in social sentiments and in attitudes, in dress and education, in songs and poems, in popular folklore, in the growth of the modern public consciousness and in the growth of a vast vernacular Press. In political practice the intelligentsia and the people struggle for the creation of a popular republic, economy and society free from the fetters of colonialism.

In this sentiment of being a colonized people lay latent the sentience of the nation and the people. It was this elemental consciousness of the nation that was potentially revolutionary. This sentience, Gandhi and the Congress were to live and express in one of its purer forms, concealed many conceptions of the process of Indians as a people-in-the-making. Social programme of the Congress could grip the masses and become a living social force because it activated this elemental chord in the minds of the colonized people. Colonial railwaymen were one such segment of this society becoming self-conscious of themselves as a people, but with a difference.

First and foremost the native railwaymen of all categories were objectively a part of the colonized people. Secondly, they were employed in an enterprise whose conditions of work and life had a structured colonial ethos. Thirdly, the railwaymen were servants of
the imperial Leviathan. Once the master–servant confrontation sharpened and acquired the form of a generalized railwaymen's protest in the post-war years, all latent social tensions began to surface.

(a) Pre-War Railway Strikes

First Indian railwaymen's agitation on the G.I.P.R. followed the first European Guards' strike of 1897 on the same railway. In April 1899 signalers on the G.I.P.R. conducted a prolonged strike for higher wages. The occurrence of the strike coincided with the execution of the Chapekar brothers for acts of terrorism. The strike was seen by the government as a Brahmin conspiracy. The majority of strikers were Brahmans but they were signalers, a very special category of workmen in railway operations. The nationalists Press, the Bombay public led by Pherozeshah Mehta and D.E. Wacha collected funds for the strikers. Here was a novel case of coalescence of the most varied interests in colonial society: The militant nationalists as represented by the Mahratta, the Kesari and a host of newspapers all over India, the signalers— the colonial railwaymen—proud of their singular position in the G.I.P.R. labour process and the

2 P.W.D, R.T., Procs. B, January 1900, n. 65-105. All details of this strike are based on this file.

moderate nationalists of Bombay and Bengal joined by some of the
doyens of Indian society. Of course, the apprehensive reaction of
the British Press to this unusual combination was one of alarm:

... this strike is of the greatest interest to
every capitalist, merchant and producer in
India, for in some respects it is a FORCAST OF
FUTURE DIFFICULTIES ..., which are likely to
present themselves under more acute and graver
forms as the years slip by. In this signallers' strike, for instance, we find the railway autho-
rities objecting on principle — but on what
principle I fail to perceive — to lawyers and
solicitors as intermediaries in disputes. This
strikes me as positively comical in a land
wherein we have set up High Courts, grounds out
(sic) our vakils and pleaders by thousands, and
tried for years past now to bring every transac-
tion between man and man, moral and intellectual,
within the Indian penal code.

No, no. We have not initiated the natives of
India in the processes of law, in the ideals of
justice and freedom of speech as understood in
the West for nothing. If the old reign of 'me
bap' is gone, and it has gone or pretty nearly,
a parental despotism is no longer possible under
the opening dawn of representative Government,
we may as well commence as soon as may be to
frankly face the possibilities which underlie
this altered condition of affairs.

... labour ever should become organized in
India — there is no doubt that it will — its
organization is certain to be used for political
purposes in the long run ...
If 99 percent of the subordinate labour in all the various ramifications of our administration must necessarily be native, it is certain that this vast working power, harmless enough under normal conditions, might at any given crisis take up a line of action, which would need all our genius for governing to hold well in hand. A labour mutiny would shake India to its foundation.

... the number of printing presses is increasing, nor can there be any doubt as to the nature of the ideas, which in only too many cases, emanate therefrom.

The strike of the G.I.P.R. signallers, supported by the Bombay public and the nationalist Press, was a singular event which focused attention on the deeper sentiments that were at work. Here was a historical demonstration of a new phenomenon — the Indian people-in-themselves-making in opposition to their British rulers. The signallers, the colonial railwaymen, had formed themselves on this occasion by their special historical location in the colonial society as the constitutive moment of this process. Similarly the Swadeshi agitation in Bengal was the occasion for a number of railway strikes. For the native railwaymen it was a time for redress of grievances, a festive occasion to lose their particularity as E.I.R. station-masters, drivers and firemen and become a part of a dissenting people — the Indians — in opposition to the 'ferenghi' community on the railways.

6 A detailed discussion of the railwaymen's agitation and its leadership during the Swadeshi movement exists in Sumit Sarker, op.cit., pp. 215-222, 242,244. However, the attitude of the public as expressed in the native press can be seen from The Daily Hitevadi, 22 July 1906: "The bull of the 'ferenghi' merchant, 'ferenghi' shopkeeper never admits defeat unless injured ... should any striker desert his comrades and resume work, he will be simply hated by the public and lose all sympathy. If
II Post-war Railwaymen's Agitation

In the post-war years all categories of railwaymen struck work. There were strikes by the workmen in all the major railway workshops. On some railways the running staff, the Indian firemen and drivers also

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you have not the strength to resist the temptations offered by whites, return to your work while there is still time and get again ill-treated by them."  

7 E.B.R. locomotive, carriage and wagon and electrical workshops of Kanchrapara (5,800 men) and metre-gauge shops, Saidpur (2,500), remained closed from 3 March 1921 till 6 June 1921, as a protest against the discharge of an apprentice. E.I.R. experienced several strikes during these years. Jamalpur workshop staff, 10,000 in number, struck work from 1 December 1919 till 16 January 1920, protesting against the introduction of daily rates. E.I.R. colliery staff was also on strike in these months demanding higher pay. The Karhar - Bahri colliery workmen were on strike again from 15 October till 26 October 1921. Colliery staff also struck work during the E.I.R. general strike of 1920. Lillooah experienced several strikes: Carriage and wagon shops remained closed as a consequence of the demand for increased wages and in sympathy with the Khilafat agitation. B.&N.W.R. locomotive shops, Gorakhpur, closed from 28 June 1920 till 3 August 1920 under the influence of political agitators. These shops again closed on 21 July 1921 for similar reasons. There was a prolonged strike in the Gorakhpur locomotive workshops from 16 December 1923 till 16 June 1924. This strike had been stirred by the refusal of the railway to recognize the workmen's Union. On the R.K.R. workshop employees abstained from work from 26 July till 16 August 1920 demanding higher wages and other benefits and expressed sympathy with the non-cooperation agitation. These workmen again struck work from 31 January till 20 February 1922 on similar demands. G.I.P.R. workshopmen struck work in August 1917 demanding war-time grain compensation and other benefits. Bandra, Paral and Matunga workshopmen again struck work from 20 May till 30 May 1920 protesting against the refusal to revise pay scales by the G.I.P.R. Locomotive and carriage wagon shops Jhansi remained closed from 15 October till 7 November 1920 demanding holiday allowance. Carriage and wagon shops Matunga and locomotive shops Paral closed from 10 August till 6 September 1921 due to labour unrest. These workmen again struck work from 12 December 1923 till 1 January 1924 protesting against medical re-examination.
struck work. During 1920 on some of the railways the gangmen struck demanding higher wages and protesting against work regulations.

There were a few general strikes connected with the question of recognition of the union and the Non-cooperation agitation. More

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On the B.B.&C.I.R., Muleer, Bandra, Parel shops and running sheds closed for a day, 20 May 1920, in sympathy with the G.I.P.R. strikers of Natunga. These workmen also struck work from 10 February till 24 February 1921 protesting against the delay in wage payment. M.&S.M.R. workshop staff, Hubli, struck work from 26 February till 6 April 1920. Similarly workshopmen of Nagapatanam struck work from 4 June till 14 June 1920, asking for pay revision. The most significant strike was of the workshopmen of Maghaipur demanding recognition of their union. The details of these strikes have been gathered from the oral and written evidence given by various railway administrations and unions, to the Royal Commission on Labour, 1930. For some details refer to R.C.L., VIII, I, pp. 250-258.

8 Loco-running staff Jharnia, E.I.R., struck work from 19 December till 6 January 1921. All departments and station staff, Indians, were on a strike in February 1922 till mid April 1922 as a protest against racial discrimination. On B.N.W.R. locomotive and engineering staff 3,200 struck work on the railways protesting against the ill-treatment of engineering staff by their superiors, non-Asians. On the B.B.&C.I.R. there was a strike in the running shed Parel from 9 December till 9 December 1921 as a protest against work regulations. Baroda locomotive shed workmen were on strike from 19 March till April 1925. There was a major protest strike on the S.I.R. by the firemen of Madura and workmen of Padanpur against the existence of racial preference for the non-Asians. The S.I.R. workmen demanded uniformity of pay and benefits for the non-Indians. On the same railway the carriage cleaners were on strike in September 1926 against blocked promotion lines and out of turn promotions. Ibid., pp. 250-58.

9 Ibid. Permanent way gangmen between Ajni and Nagpur on the G.I.P.R. struck work in April 1927 protesting against the revision of duty hours. M.&S.M.R. permanent way gangmen were on strike from 22 June till 2 July, 1920 demanding higher wages. Similarly engineering staff, Arkanam were strike from 2 August till 21 August 1920 demanding higher wages.

10 On A.E.R. in all departments, 8,024 workmen struck work from 24 May till 7 September 1921 as influenced by the non-cooperation agitators. On E.I.R. all departments led by Tundla railwaymen
often these strikes were not confined to a particular category on a railway but often spilled into a general all category agitation.


In the course of strikes, strike-committees were formed. These committees served varied functions such as providing the workshopmen a shop-floor leadership, conducting negotiations on behalf of the workers and keeping in close touch with the local and regional political agitators, labour leaders, peoples' lawyers, newspapers or some public body which could arbitrate in the dispute. These inter-

stopped work protesting against racial discrimination from February till mid April 1922. In April 1919 all categories of N.W.R. workmen struck, following the arrest of Gandhi, and protesting against the Rawlatt Act. Carriage and wagon workmen of Moghalpura struck work from 22 April till 10 June 1920 demanding recognition of their union. The political context of the strike was the Khilafat agitation. This strike spread to all categories of Indians on all the stations. N.W.R. locomotive shops, Karachi, closed on 6 April 1921 to inaugurate the Non-cooperation agitation in the city. Again all departments of the N.W.R. were on strike at Lahore from 25 June till 1 July 1921 following the discharge of three workmen. This strike had been started by non-cooperation agitators. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-58.
mediaries between the workshopmen and the railways in a definitive way influenced the course of evolution of workshopmen's and other lower grades' agitation. The upper and lower grade Indian railwaymen's leadership often attempted to mould the workshopmen's struggle to their own agitational perspectives. As a consequence the workshopmen's strikes often did not remain only an industrial action. The peculiarity of railwaymen's agitation of this phase, 1919-22, lay in its regional variations with different organizational and political perspectives. The southern railwaymen of the M.&S.M.R. and S.I.R. were influenced by the Home Rule League. The Bombay railwaymen of the G.I.P.R. and B.B.&C.I.R. were initially organized by the Home Rule League. But by 1921, the current of corporate labour reformism of N.M. Joshi was to predominate and become the constitutive movement of the All India Railway Federation. The N.W. railwaymen, led by Moghalpura workshopmen of Lahore, were to initiate a powerful anti-imperialist labour agitation, first in its nationalist form and later under communist influence. The eastern railwaymen of E.I.R., S.N.R., E.S.R. and A.B.R. were to create two counterposed currents of labour agitation: The European workers' non-political agitation was confined to the superior grades. In contrast, the first all category native railwaymen's political agitation was led by the non-cooperation agitators in 1922. However, the most organized agitation, with anti-imperialist overtones, was conducted by the N.W.R. workshopmen.
III N.W. Railwaymen’s Agitation, 1919-1920

By March 1921, the N.W.R. Association with its active membership of nearly 40,000 was the single largest railwaymen's combination in India, drawing its strength from the Moghalpura workshopmen of Lahore, Rawalpindi and Karachi. On all major stations, the lower station staff and the coolies were its active members. A section of its leadership was drawn from the operating grades of natives. The railway assistant station-masters and signalers along with other technical categories formed its core. The peculiarity of this combination lay in its leadership; it was organized by J.B. Miller, a European, an ex-guard and an ex-soldier. Its general secretary M.A. Khan had, by 1922, become an active member of the Inquilab, one of the first communist groupings formed under the influence of M.N. Roy, Lajpat Rai was associated with the activities of this association and was its representative at the All India Railway Conference (A.I.R.C.) in Bombay in February 1921.

11 R.E., Proc., 8, July 1921, n. 402/1-13, "Railway Unions in India."
12 J.M. Miller was born in 1880 in Ceylon. Started his career on the E.I.R. but was dismissed from service during the E.I.R. European locamen's strike of 1907. Then he served for a while in the canal factory at Rurki and also served in the army before he rejoined the O.R.R. as a guard in Saharanpur. He was again dismissed from service during the O.R.R. loco-strike in 1920. He was fond of athletics and was popular with the Indian staff at Saharanpur because he organized sports and games. He had a sister who kept a shop in Rawalpindi in 1920. By 1925 John Miller came to be referred to as 'Mahatama' Miller. There were streaks of the messianic mission of T.E. Lawrence in his personality.
13 Fortnightly report of first half of January, Home Political, Deposit, April 1921, n. 42.
The N.W.R. Association, and its highly political leadership, was a product of the social milieu of the Punjab of 1919-1922. The N.W.R. was the single largest state-owned and state-managed railway of the empire. From Peshawar to Delhi it connected the wheat and cotton hinterlands to the port of Karachi. Its laboring men catered to the needs of diverse sections of the colonial populace. Above all, the N.W.R. was the crucial 'defence line' to the Afghan border and the only link to Kabul and from there to Tashkent and Bolshevism. By the end of the war, this region was to witness the resurgence of a number of anti-colonial mass agitations: Anti-Rowlatt Act agitation of 1919, Khilafat agitation of 1920 and the Non-cooperation agitation of 1921-22. By 1919 various social and political currents had made their impact on the railwaymen, especially on those employed in the crucial operations on the stations, such as, signellers and telegraphists. The Arya Samaj, the Indian National Congress, the Home Rule League and Lala Lajpat Rai had found the railwaymen responsive to the ideas of swaraj. The anti-Rowlatt Act agitation provided the first opportunity for these railwaymen to express their sentiments on an issue of national significance.

14 "The whole of our operations and work on the frontier depend on the N.W.R. being open and an efficient concern. For some time past I have been anxious about the strike situation for we have had large movements of troops and any stoppage of railway work would have serious repercussions for us." C.W. Jacob, Lt. General, Chief of the General Staff to the Secretary of State in Home Political, Procs. A, May 1920, n. 308-309.

(a) N.W.R. Strike, 1919

The anti-Rowlatt Act agitation had politicized all sections of the Punjab populace; railwaymen were no exception. The war had created grave conditions for the laboring men, especially the lowest paid. On several occasions the Lahore station staff had memorialized the N.W.R. on its urgent demands and had threatened a general strike on the railways. The anti-Rowlatt Act agitation provided the occasion for the railwaymen to express their sentiments against the oppression of the colonial state who was their employer as well as their ruler. An unsuccessful attempt was made during April 1919 to bring about a general strike on all the railway in India. A message was telegraphed from Lahore to Delhi at about mid day on the 11 April:

The public here have turned against government. City is being looted. We have decided to strike work from 14 hours. Ask all railways to follow suit at once."18


16 In 1918, a memorandum from guards, station-masters, assistant station-masters and train clerks was sent asking for increase in pay and other concessions regarding free quarters, rent, provident fund and gratuity. R.E., Proos, B, February 1918, n. 131/1-20.

17 Home Political. Proos. B, October 1919, n. 398-420. "Judgment in the Shakurpur wire-cutting and railway strike." A detailed investigation was made regarding the strike messages by central intelligence agencies all over India. Assessment of this strike is entirely based on this investigation. Also see Home Political Proos. A, June 1919, n. 144/162.

18 Ibid.
the connecting rail systems. A facsimile of the message from Shakur-

pur read as follows:

All railways, Great Indian Peninsula, Rajputana, Malwa Railway, Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway and Offices leave work to night from 0

hours passive resistance Gandhi arrested, from Indian brothers.\(^19\)

Another message in a telegram was intercepted at Kharagpur. This telegram was addressed to all station masters, loco-staff and Indian staff only. It read as follows:

On receiving words the "Rowlatt" Indian Military Soldiers and railwaymen decided to strike in Punjab as well as on East Indian Railway and Oudh and Rohilkand Railway. Telegraph to Great Indian Peninsula and Bengal Nagpur to look out and do needful at once.\(^20\)

No general strike, however, occurred except on the N.W.R. On some stations workmen of all categories struck work led by the traffic grades specifically the native assistant station-masters, telegraphists and signalers; thus partially paralysing traffic. Delhi, Kishanganj, Shakurpur, Jakhel, Bhatinda, Bhawanagar and Samaata branch lines workmen struck on 14 April 1919. Khanewal, Ambala and Multan city, the main line stations, struck on 15 April. On other stations, in the Punjab, workmen could not be called out because of the adequate military arrangements to check the spread of the strike. Sympathetic strikes occurred amongst the clerks of the B.B.&C.I.R. (metre gauge) in the District Traffic Superintendent's office in Delhi. The Indian students

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
of the C.I.R. Training School (Delhi) and the station coolies at Delhi struck work following Gandhi's arrest on 10 April 1919. 21

This spontaneous strike action of the N.W.R. railwaymen, in spite of the martial law restrictions in the Punjab, gives a glimpse into the evolving structure of consciousness. The Indian brothers' message was given by a signaler Gokal Behari Pandey, a Congress worker, from Etawah. The "Rowlatt" message was drafted in Delhi again by two signalers, Shyam Lal, Fazl Elahi, and Panna Lal (an Arya Samajist and a follower of Swami Shraddhanand), a dismissed railway signaler. The initial Lahore message had been sent by Gulam Husain, a railway signaler, who was to become the editor of the Inqilab in 1922, and lead the first communist grouping in the Punjab. 22

The strike could not be effective as no previous, sectional or corporate, class or political, organization existed amongst the railwaymen. So it remained confined within a comparatively short radius of Delhi. The occasion for the strike was the arrest of Gandhi and the protest 'hertal' called on 14 April in Delhi by the Home Rule League agitators, Satyagraha Sabha and the Hindu-Muhammadan Union. The station staff, telegraphists and signalers, of Shakurpur played a leading role in the dissemination of these messages. The direct involvement of the outside political groups in the Delhi signalers and station staff strike seemed to be per-

21 Disorder Inquiry Committee Report, pp. 59, 90.
pheral. The signallers of Lahore, Etawah, and Delhi had initiated the move for an all India general strike which was the first political protest of railwaymen.\textsuperscript{23}

(b) N.W.R. Strike of 1920

By 1920, this embryonic labour agitation of the station staff was joined in by the Moghalpura workshopmen and other departments.

The immediate demand was an increase in wages. The Indian-owned press exhorted the workmen to strike.

...they will have to resort to the noble principle of satyagraha in the end. Their bread problem can be solved only with the aid of passive resistance.\textsuperscript{24}

Nearly 5,000 workmen of the carriage and wagon workshop of Moghalpura, Lahore struck work on the 24 April 1920. The immediate cause of the strike was the dismissal of seven fitters of the gas and vacuum shops, who refused to obey orders. The railway power house employees joined the strike on the 27 April and the loco-workshopmen struck work on the 29 April. Traffic staff of Lahore, even some Europeans, joined the strike; thus restricting train movements.\textsuperscript{25} Acting under the influence of Lajpat Rai and Maulvi Zafar Ali, a Khilafat leader, the pressmen of the Civil and Military Gazette joined the strike on

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Railway, 22 March 1920, Punjab Press Abstract (hereafter P.P.A.), 27 March 1920; Also see P.P.A. of 3 April 1920.

\textsuperscript{25} Fortnightly report for the first half of May 1920, Home Political Department, July 1920, no. 94; Also refer to R.E., Procs. 9, May 1921, no. 715/110-116.
30 April protesting against the article "Playing with Fire" published on the 29 April, which made derogatory references to the railway strikers.  

The N.W.R. Association demanded the immediate reinstatement of the dismissed workers of Lahore, a comprehensive wage increase inclusive of the war allowance, grain compensation, and recognition of the union. Initially till 20 May 1920 the strike was confined to Lahore and as it was feared that it might spread; the N.W.R. administration agreed to pay the salaries to the striking workshopmen for the month of April. It cancelled the dismissal order placed on the fitters and agreed to allow the strikers to resume work, subject to rules regarding break in service. The demand for wage increase was to be considered only after the strikers had resumed work. The N.W.R. administration, however, refused to recognise the N.W.R. Association. The issue of refusal of recognition of the Association angered the workmen all over the line and the strike spread.

The native railwaymen of all categories abstained from work in Ludhiana, Ferozepore, Gujranwala, Amritsar and Rawalpindi from 20 May. In Rawalpindi, the loco and carriage workshopmen, along with

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26 Civil and Military Gazette, 29 April 1920.

27 Oral evidence M.A. Khan, general secretary N.W.R. General Worker's Union, Royal Commission on Labour in India, VIII, I, Railways (Oral evidence) (hereafter R.C.L., VIII, I), 1930; Also see Fortnightly report for second half of May 1920, Home Political, Deposit, July 1920, n. 95.
the traffic grades stopped work from 22 May. The European drivers of Lahore, twelve in number, were ordered to act as black legs. They refused to comply with the order even under the threat of dismissal. Fearing a generalized desertion by the European workmen, the government withdrew this order. Fearing that strike may spread to Peshawar, the Military Department advocated the use of Seditions Meetings Act or Defence of India Rules to check the activities of Miller, the chief organiser of the strike. While the Government was trying to restrict the strike, Karachi railwaymen followed suit, with nearly 2,000 workmen striking work from the 21 May 1920. Khilafat agitators were associated with the Karachi strike action.

Once the strike began in Lahore, Gujranwala, Amritsar and in Sind the Home Rule and Khilafat agitators formed joint committees and promised the railway strikers financial support. In Amritsar workmen of the Central Canal Workshop struck work on 19 May 1920 in sympathy with the railway strike. A public meeting of the strike

28 Home Political, Deposit, July 1920, n. 95.
30 Home Political, Deposit, June 1920, n. 78. This N.W.R. strike, involving all grades, including some of the European workmen, was a spontaneous action. Even the N.W.R. Association leaders were surprised by this strike-action. A strike had been planned by the Khilafat agitators in cooperation with Lajpat Rai and the N.W.R. Association leaders, Miller and Khan. It was designed to occur simultaneously with the announcement of Turkish peace terms. However, this strike broke out prematurely.
leaders and local political agitators was held in Amritsar on the same day. After the meeting the crowd carried M.A. Khan and Miller, the leaders of the N.W.R. Association, through the city. The rally ended at the Jallianwala Bagh where the labour leaders addressed the public. Commenting on the strike the \textit{Week} of 23 June 1920, wrote: "The first (phase of the) strike was the outcome of hunger but the present one involves a question of Indian honour." It asked the trading community to liberally help the strikers, "who were trying to maintain national honour."

Even outside the Punjab, the N.W.R. strike evoked a sympathetic response. Resolutions were passed by the G.I.P.R. workmen's associations of Paral and Matunga, Bombay Dock Workmen's Union and the Bombay United Textiles Workmen's Union. One day's wage of the workmen affiliated to these unions was sent as a contribution to the 'N.W.R. strikers' fund. The strike was sustained for nearly seven weeks because the N.W.R. Association had been able to generate its own funds about Rs. 20,000 at the time of the strike.

\textbf{References:}


2. \textit{Home Political, Deposit, July 1920}, n. 76.

Moreover, the public donated generously to the strikers' fund. Nearly Rs. 27,000 were disbursed to assist the lowest paid workmen in the month of May. There was opposition to the strike from the Karachi Chamber of Commerce, a body of European traders, as stated in the Daily Gazette, Karachi, 19 May 1920. Though supporting the pay demand of the workmen, this newspaper expressed its apprehension about the question of the recognition of the union: "... the Bolshevik tinge about the whole position (of the union) is somewhat ominous."

The strike came to an end on 10 June 1920. It had been a novel event. The occurrence of the strike in the course of the Khilafat agitation and in league with this agitation had enormously increased its significance. Instead of being a mere labour agitation it had become a political event directed at the empire itself. A large majority of the railwaymen of the N.W.R. were Muslims. The Khilafat agitation had provided the occasion for these native railwaymen to express their sentiments on an issue which had acquired national significance. Though the Khilafat agitation had provided the unifying political colour to the agitation, the underlying issue of the agitation was the question of the recognition of the independent N.W.R. Association, with John Miller as its leader. The N.W.R. Association had been the legitimate representative of all sections.

34 Fortnightly report of second half of June 1920, Home Political, Deposit, July 1920, n. 97; Also see Pratan (Lahore), 31 May 1920, "The oppression of Railway officials of Ludhiana."
of railwaymen including the European workmen. John Miller's leadership, along with the Khilafat and Home Rule League participation and support from the Moghalpure workshopmen, made the N.W.R. Association acceptable to all sections of the native workmen — the 'babus' workshopmen and coolies. This was the first experiment of the railwaymen to form a militant general labour union in an anti-colonial mould and to wage a ruthless battle for its recognition. Public sympathy and financial support from the public was not found wanting. This struggle for recognition of a quasi-political railwaymen's union drew sympathy and attention from the workshopmen all over the country. Here was a historical demonstration of a new idea — the laboring men led by a European emerging as an anti-colonial Indian people.

The N.W.R. administration had opposed the strike from its inception. However, it offered its terms to the men wanting to join work. 10 June 1920 was fixed as the last after which the striking men were to be replaced. Nearly 7,000 out of the 11,000 workmen in Lahore reported for work. Those absenting from work, after the 10 June were laid off, and were asked to vacate the railway quarters.35

35 The 1920 N.W.R. strike was only a dress rehearsal of the N.W.R. strike of 26 March 1925. Under the same union leadership, which by now had assumed communist leanings, the N.W.R. men nearly 70,000, struck work demanding the recognition of their union. The strike lasted till 27 July 1925. About 17,000 workmen were dismissed, with the strike collapsing without any gains. For details of this strike see my M.Phil thesis, The Emergence of the Railway Labour Movement in India, 1899-1925, A Preliminary Study (unpublished, Jamia Millia Islamia, Nehru University, 1980).
The N.W.R. administration, the Government of India and the Karachi Chamber of Commerce had viewed this strike, its demands and its political context with suspicion and apprehension. A close watch was kept on the strike leadership and their Khilafat connections.

Strike and Khilafat question taken separately are not immediately dangerous to order, but when combined there is a ground for anxiety both in Lahore and elsewhere.36

The Government of India accepted the fact that the strike was political. But it desired not to treat it as political under the Seditious Meetings Act, though the Foreign and Military Departments repeatedly asked the Government to restrict the entry of John Miller, 'a tool of political and seditious agitators', 37 to Rawalpindi and Peshawar by imprisonment or deportation to England. The Home Department was instructed by the Secretary of State not to use Seditious Meetings Act or Defence of India Rules against labour agitators. Such an action could result in further intensification of the strike and would result in embarrassing queries in the Parliament.38 The railway administration also did not try to suppress the strike but treated it

36 Telegram n. 389, dated 11 May 1920, from the Viceroy (Home Department) to the Secretary of State, Home Political, Proos. A. May 1920, n. 310-313 and KW.

37 Ibid. Miller was arrested on 18 February, 1922 for instigating a riot and stoning a train.

38 Parliamentary enquiries were made. Home Political, 1922, n. 579. "Papers relating to the arrest of Miller and Khan." A resolution was also passed by the Dundee, District Union of Jute and Flax workers protesting against the imprisonment of J.S. Miller of the Railwaymen's Union of India. Department of Industries, 1922, L. 1077 (1).
separately from the Khilafat agitation and allowed it to collapse by its own.

IV  Background to the All India Railway Conference

The Home Rule League had been associated with the N.W.R. agitation since its inception. Its efforts were directed towards the formation of an all India labour organization. Since 1918 its agitators had attempted to organize workshopmen in Lahore on the N.W.R., in Bombay on the G.I.P.R., and in Hubli on the M.&S.M.R. 39

However, a section of Bombay and Madras railwaymen, led by labour reformers and supported by Amalgamated Society of Railway Servant of India (A.S.R.S.) had a different conception of railwaymen's national level organization. 40 In Parel and Matunga on the G.I.P.R. and B.B.&C.I.R., in Hubli and Nagapattan on the M.&S.M.R., and in Arkonam on the S.I.R., workshopmen's agitation of 1920 led by the clerical and traffic categories was to become the basis for a programme of non-political railwaymen's activity. The upper subordinate native railwaymen, the station-masters, signallers, ticket-

39  Pioneer, 16 December 1918; Also see Fortnightly Report for the first half of February 1919, Home Political, Deposits, March 1919, n. 242-249. In June 1918, a labour association had been formed on the M.&S.M.R. with the assistance of B.P. Meda. New India and Common Weal, two popular newspapers, in a series of articles in 1918 expressed the grievance of the traffic subordinates of the M.&S.M.R. and workshopmen of Nagapattan.

collectors and guards, had come under the influence of labour lawyers, such as S.H. Jhabwala, F.J. Ginwala of Bombay, and B.P. Wadia of Madras. As the G.I.P.R., B.B.&C.I.R., M.&S.M.R. and S.I.R. were not the 'political lines' of the Raj but its commercial rails, the presence of a powerful Indian business community and a non-political current of labour protest provided an environment for the crystallization of a non-political railwaymen's agitation. The All India Railway Conference was the culmination of this process.

(a) G.I.P.R. Strikes 1917-1921

The backdrop to the formation of this all India railwaymen's organization was provided by the agitation of Indian upper and lower subordinates on the G.I.P.R. during 1917-1922. The militant thrust to this agitational activity came from the Parel and Matunga workshopmen, supported by the B.B.&C.I.R. workmen of Mulseer, Bandra and Parel shops, demanding a revision of pay scales and other benefits agreed to by the G.I.P.R. company after the 1917 strike.

From 25 July 1917 the Parel and Matunga workshopmen nearly 15,000 of them had struck work for two months demanding higher wages, war allowance and grain compensation. It was the first independent

41 Home Political, Deposit, September 1917, no. 29; R.F. Proos. B, December 1917, no. 924/1-49.

42 Kesari, 31 July 1917 in R.N.P., (Bombay) for the week ending 10 August 1917; Young India, 22 August 1917; Maharatta, 19 August 1917; Kesari, 28 August 1917 in R.N.P., (Bombay), for the week ending 2 September 1917. Bombay Chronicle was the main spokesman of the striking workers.
Indian railwaymen's action on the G.I.P.R. after the Signallers' strike of 1899. Supported by the Home Rule League, which organized financial assistance for the strikers, the Bombay public and the nationalist Press, the strike had developed into a tough confrontation between the railwaymen and the G.I.P.R. company supported by the Bombay Government. The Indian-owned Press encouraged the workshopmen to organize themselves on the lines of English trade unions. Gujratî of 26 August 1917 saw in the strike a sign of the growing maturity of the Indian people to agitate within constitutional limits:

The behaviour of the strikers and the public support given by the people of Bombay give a clear proof of the fitness of the Indian people for swaraj and of the training they have received for conducting their agitation without transgressing the law.

The workshopmen of Parel and Matunga had availed of the services of a solicitor, F.J. Gifwala, and had asked for arbitration by the Governor of Bombay. Though by the end of August 1917 some agreement had been reached between the workshopmen and the G.I.P.R. company in regard to pay increase, owing to an incident of violence on the shop floor the proposed pay increase had been withheld.

The Parel and Matunga workshopmen of the G.I.P.R. again struck work from 25 May 1920. This strike also spread to the B.E.C.I.R.

43 Ibid. R.N.P. (Bombay), for the week ending 10 August 1917.
44 R.N.P. (Bombay), for the week ending 3 September 1917.
45 R.N.P. (Bombay), for the week ending 14 September 1917.
workshopmen in Parel and Matunga. It was supported by loco-men of the running sheds and the lowest paid 'coolies'. The G.I.P.R. Workmen's Union was formed, which succeeded in getting revision of pay scales all along the line. The successful strike of the workshopmen accelerated the process of self-organization of all categories. Indian railwaymen — station-masters, telegraphists, hamals, porters, guards and drivers — began organizing all along the railway line.

A conference of labour leaders at Manmad marked a beginning in the process of self-organization of the workers of the G.I.P.R. Its culmination was the Igatpuri conference, of September 1920, attended by 200 delegates representatives of all sections of the G.I.P.R. workmen. After the conference, a memorandum was submitted to the Agent with the following demands: War allowance be extended to August 1920, a wage increase as agreed to by the Agent in May 1920, without reducing 10 per cent war allowance be given. Grain compensation from 1 April 1919 be granted. Workshopmen on the G.I.P.R. threatened a general strike from 15 September 1920 if these demands were not met. Though the Agent, G.I.P.R. ignored the strike ultimatum but the strike did not materialize. Various other category associations had emerged in the course of this agitation. These associations merged and formed the G.I.P.R. Staff Union. It proposed to convene an All India Railway

46 Times of India, 26 May 1920.
47 Times of India, 26 September 1920.
48 Times of India, 12 September 1920.
Conference to demand for all railwaymen of India eight hours working day, price-based minimum wage, the act of strike not be considered a breach in service, a generalized increase in wages and end to racial discrimination in railway work operations. The initiative to convene an All India Railwaymen's conference had come from many quarters; however, the G.I.P.R. labour agitation led by G.I.P.R. Staff Union was the constituting moment.

V Agitation by Non-Asians

The post-war railwaymen's strike action was confined to the non-white Indians and in particular to the workshopmen. However, railwaymen of all categories, even the Europeans and the Anglo-Indians, formed associations to press for an immediate pay-revision, and other benefits. There was also an attempt by the non-Asians to foster an all India railwaymen's association, representing all categories of railwaymen.

(a) Pre-war Strikes

In the pre-war phase the first organized opposition to the railways had come from the Europeans. The first railwaymen's asso-

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Association, constituted in 1897, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (A.S.R.S.) of India and Burma, was an adjunct of the A.S.R.S. of Britain. It was a national level combination of railwaymen. Though in principle the membership of this association was open to all grades, categories, and communities of railwaymen; in actuality it was confined to the covenanted European workers, primarily the drivers and guards, of the loco-running category. It had of course a few Indians as its active members and was spread all over the G.I.P.R., B.B.& C.I.R., M.& S.M.R. and S.I.R. Though this organization was started as a self-help society it came to express militancy over general issues. It conducted three successful strikes: the strike of the guards on the G.I.P.R. in 1897; the M.& S.M.R. strike

50 Railway Department General (hereafter RG), Progs. A. September 1913, n. 3-124.

51 Long hours of work, in unfavourable climatic conditions, was one of significant grievances of those employed on the N.W.R. and E.I.R. These workers agitated on following demands: Eight hour working day with adequate rest, 25 to 50 per cent increase in salary, improvement of provident fund and gratuity rules of the running staff, permission to accumulate privileged leave up to six months, grant of suitable quarters, free medical attendance for wives and families, and grant of a temporary separation allowance to those who had their families in England. R.E., Progs. A. October 1920, n. 437/1-16. "Memorandum of the conditions of service, pay etc., for covenanted mechanics and running staff recruited for State Railways from England." 15 per cent of the substantive pay was given to them as allowance for the maintenance of their families in England. R.E., Progs. B. March 1920, n. 255/1-137; also see R.E., Progs. B. August 1919, n. 1339/1-17 for "Representation from the Bombay branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers regarding conditions of employment of covenanted British Mechanics; Also see Memorandum National Union of Railwaymen of India and Burma, R.C.I., VIII, I. For more details also see R.E., Progs. A. August 1919, n. 478/1-33.
of the station staff of 1909 and the general strike of 1913. In the 1913 strike, workmen belonging to all categories and communities participated. In fact this was the first all India labour organization, constituting the principle of general labour union. After the 1913 strike this organization was contained by several measures:

Employment of Anglo-Indians, retrenchment of Europeans as a consequence of the war, inclusion of a new service agreement making compulsory the membership of the Indian Auxiliary Force, improvements in the covenanted services and legislation banning strikes by the Europeans.

(b) Post-war Agitation by Non-Asians

In the post-war years first initiative had come from the E.I.R. and G.N.R. European and Anglo-Indian traffic and loco-running cate-

52 On the M.& S.M.R., a strike involving 2,068 railwaymen occurred. Workmen of the traffic and station departments station-masters, signalers, ticket-collectors, shunters, guards, drivers, firemen, pointmen and porters participated. This strike was on the whole confined to the Europeans; a number of Indian workers also participated. On the G.I.P.R., 1,290 loco and traffic men struck work in late May 1913 in sympathy with the M.& S.M.R. workmen. Similarly on the B.B. & C.I.R. workshopmen of Parel and traffic staff abstained from work. On the S.I.R., there was considerable unrest among the Europeans but no strike occurred. R.G., Proga. A, September 1913, n. 3-124. The nationalist Press opposed the strike. It asked the Indian workers not to support the Europeans.

53 The A.S.R.S. could emerge as an all-India combination because of various reasons: firstly, its members belonged to the loco-running, the mobile all-India category. Secondly, they were governed by different service conditions than the Indians, as they were on a covenant. Lastly, this organization was started by formal recruits, of the British railways retrenched in the 1900 signaler's strike, with militant Victorian railwaymen's antecedents.
gories, who formed the Railway Workmen's Association (R.W.A.) in 1919. This organization over the course of a year came to have branches on all railways in India; the largest representation came from the E.I.R., B.N.R., E.S.R. and the Calcutta-based light railways.

The widespread support the R.W.A. received from the superior, upper and lower subordinates was due to the demands it had put forward: 75 per cent increase in pre-war wages, constitution of a permanent conciliation board, the application of the Workmen's Compensation Act to railwaymen, limitations of hours of work and overtime allowance, improved leave rules, free railway passes, quarters for all railway servants and standardization of wages. The issue of a permanent conciliation board had first appeared in the 1907 strike and it had remained unresolved since then. As the A.S.R.S. had not

54 Home Political, Deposit, November 1919, n. 14. A meeting of nearly 300 European and Indian members of the E.I.R. staff was held in Asansol on 7 October 1919. The object of this meeting was to organize an All India Railway Workmen's Association (hereafter R.W.A.), to protect the interests of all sections of railwaymen in India.

55 Statesman, 30 March 1921, Letter to the Editor from the President R.W.A. The Association, it was claimed, was the only representative of "railwaymen of railways servicing Calcutta." Also see Englishman, 24 January 1921.

56 R.E. Progs. 8, July 1921, n. 1780/1-57, p. 71. However, in their propaganda the R.W.A. had been agitating on general issues, such as, negotiations to be begun only after a strike, and to racial discrimination, security and stability of service, cooperative stores for all railwaymen, technical education and representation of railwaymen to the Railway Board. Pioneer, 17 November 1920; Also see Times of India, 16 July, 14 August 1920.

57 For details of the issue of a Conciliation Board see Indian Railway Conference Association Proceedings, 1907, Railway Board (Railway Board Library); Also see R.T., Progs. A, July 1910, n. 708/1-7.
been given official recognition as the railwaymen's representative body, the R.W.A. contended that it should be recognized as the genuine representative of all categories of railwaymen. 58

The R.W.A. was primarily an appendage of the Indian Telegraph Association (I.T.A.), a predominantly European body. Along with the skilled operatives of the Imperial Press and the Indian Telegraph Association, the R.W.A. had emphasized the problem of hours of work and over-time of the traffic, loco-running and the mechanical department. 59 As this association had disapproved of any form of politics, the pure corporate nature of its organization was attractive even to the Anglo-Indians. On two of its demands - 75 per cent increase in pay over 1914 and end to racial discrimination - the R.W.A. was able to evoke a sympathetic response even from the Indians. 60 E. Jones, general secretary of the R.W.A. had called for racial amity while addressing the railway employees in Calcutta:

They must remember to maintain the high reputation the Association had so far kept up, the indissoluble unity that had been established between the workers of all classes and the universal brotherhood of labour irrespective of caste, colour and creed which they had placed before them and for which they were fighting. 61

58 R.E., Progs. B. July 1921, n. 1780/1-57, p. 46. The R.W.A. demanded that it be recognized as the only legitimate representative of railwaymen of India and Burma.

59 On the O.R.R., the European loco-running staff had made a determined bid in February 1920 to get equivalent wages to the N.W.R. loco-staff but with little success.

60 Bengal &. 27 February 1921.

61 Ibid.
The R.W.A. was yet another attempt by European workmen, to form an all-India, all railwaymen's association. This experiment from its inception was fraught with tensions. The immediate rallying point of all sections of railwaymen was revision of pay scales. By February 1921, pay scales of nearly all categories of railwaymen had been considerably revised. On other issues serious differences existed between railwaymen various categories and communities. The Indian railwaymen of the E.I.R., B.N.R. and E.B.R. had formed their own associations demanding redress of their grievances. These associations led by the All India Railway Labour Union demanded "the removal of differences of colour, creed, work, pay and accommodation amongst the railwaymen." A.I.R.L.U. Kharagpur, declared that it

62 R.E., Procs. 8, June 1922, n. 1251/1-16.

63 The Englishman, 24 February 1921. In Kharagpur, the All India Railway Labour Union (A.I.R.L.U.) was organized under the leadership of Ajodhya Prasad, a local Congress worker, and the joint vice-president of the Kharagpur Labour Union. This union was formed after the Kharagpur strike of October 1919 on the advice of Gandhi, who had suggested that a purely Indian railwaymen's association be started. C.R. Das was taking an active interest in this union. Fortnightly Report for the first half of December 1920, Home Political, Deposit, December 1920, n. 59. The union put forward the following demands: 75 per cent increase in pay from 1 April 1919, reduction in the salaries of superior staff, 25 per cent of the higher services to be filled by promotions from below, end to racial discrimination in pay, recruitment and promotions, technical schools for the natives, leave rules for all including the daily rated workmen, housing and facilities for children's education for all sections of railway employees, lastly no interference about the social and political views of the B.N.R. employees. R.E., Procs. 8, July 1921, n. 402/1-13. This union was classified as of "a semi-political character in an industrial guise."
would be a partisan to any strike action of the R.W.A. only on the condition that "equality of opportunity, pay, housing and social conditions" were granted to all railwaymen "and that no one was to resume duty till all these demands were granted in their entirety."

Otherwise, it called upon all sections of the natives to take the place of Europeans and Anglo-Indians in case the latter struck work. 65

This differentiation along community basis was a major blow to the emerging united railwaymen's agitation. But the R.W.A. from its inception had been dominated by the Europeans and Anglo-Indians. However, for it to be recognized by the Railway Board, as the legitimate representative of railwaymen in India, and to find constitutional representation in the Legislative Council, the support of the Indians was indispensable. The European section of the R.W.A. had decried this division on community basis and agitated for a formal end to racial discrimination. As C.D. Rose, branch secretary, Railway Workmen's Association, (E.I.R.) ... said:

... no success of any sort was possible for the Europeans, if the Indians were left out of such an association. R.W.A. was Indian, as I had worked in India. India is my motherland.66

65 Fortnightly Report of first half of March 1921, Home Political Deposit, June 1921, n. 65.

66 C.D. Rose, branch Secretary R.W.A. (E.I.R.); Amrita Bazar Patrika, 20 March 1921. The Englishman, 14 March 1921 carried a scathing criticism of the B.N.R. Anglo-Indians who were responsible for racial tension.
A stronger opposition to the R.W.A., from the domiciled Europeans and Anglo-Indians and even from Europeans, came to the surface when the R.W.A. in league with the I.T.A. and the Calcutta Pressmen threatened a general strike from 28 February, 1921. Sentiment of opposition was adequately expressed in a letter to the Statesman:

"... such action can only tend to undermine the Empire which the other fellows fought and suffered to consolidate ... I would like to ask each man, before he goes out on a strike, to count the cost to of his country." The letter ended:

Here and here, did England help me? How can I help England? Say I propose to help England — the Land of my Fathers — and India, by helping to keep the wheels going round, if it's only on a Burdwan local.68

Domiciled Europeans and Anglo-Indians Association led, by Lt. Col. Gidney, opposed the strike and offered to mediate.69 This proposal was accepted by the R.W.A. on the condition that "he handled the question on behalf of the Telegraph and Railway member but not as of any particular community."70 The R.W.A. executive postponed

67 Statesman, 25 February 1921; see Also Englishman, 25 February 1921; Amrita Bazar Patrika, 26 February 1921.


69 Lt. Col. Gidney was "... of the opinion that the R.W.A. in its present constitution could not be worked as representing both Indian and European Labour interests." He strongly recommended to the R.W.A., the formation of a separate, entirely, European and Anglo-Indian organization. The Englishman, 28 February 1921. For details of the Anglo-Indian position see R.E... Procees, 8. September, 1922, n. 609/1-11.

70 H. Barton, President R.W.A. in a letter to the Editor, The Englishman, 28 February 1921. A meeting of European and Indian
the strike action and accepted a committee of enquiry of the Railway Board primarily due to the instruction from the loco-running staff of Jamalpur, the headquarters of the loco-running department, who did not favour a general strike.\(^{71}\) Allahabad and Kharagpur sections of the R.W.A. had also opposed this extreme step.\(^{72}\) The R.W.A. action was also opposed by the A.S.R.S.\(^{73}\) The second attempt to form an all railwaymen's general union led by the superior grades, the Europeans, failed. Immediate cause of the collapse of the R.W.A. was the disunity amongst its ranks; a disunity in-built in the colonial structure of the railway work force and continually fostered by the divisive racial policy of the Railway Board.\(^{74}\) However, there was a more general cause for the collapse of the R.W.A. and its predecessor the A.S.R.S.

The British railways in India had a two-fold identity. They were an extension of the arm of law and order of the colonial state. They were also the all India spread out industrial Leviathan. Opposition to its authority by its laboring men, European or Indian, was

Cont'd... f.n. 70

railwaymen held in Calcutta pledged, "to get racial distinctions abolished on railway systems in India." They were to together fight for equal status, pay and position for all railway employees. \textit{The Englishman}, 1 March 1921; Also see \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, 1 March 1921.

71 \textit{The Englishman}, 1 March 1921.

72 \textit{Ibid}.

73 \textit{Statesman}, 1 March 1921.

74 \textit{R.E. Procs. 8, September} 1922, n. 609/1-11.
basically an act of hostility to the colonial regime. Such an opposition to the authority of the railways, even in its trade union form, had all the potentialities of becoming a total opposition to British rule. Any combination of railwaymen with a strike perspective was seen by the colonial authorities to be potentially subversive. The superior grades, the Europeans, among them even the militant European workmen, were an integral part of the railways as an imperial enterprise and of colonialism in general. They could represent only a partial opposition from within to this defining identity of the railways. Non-political combinations, even in a defined trade union form, like the R.W.A. and A.S.R.S., could not become effective as they struggled for their particular demands, but not against the colonial structure of the railway labour force, in which the natives were victims of gross inequalities.

VI Formation of the All India Railway Federation

In crucial railway services in colonial India, the non-whites were only the lower subordinates with little or no prospect for pro-

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75 Home Public. Police, Proce. 8, May 1919, n. 184. Referring to the railway strike scheme, War section, Army Head Quarters, Simla, notified all army divisions: "In certain schemes definition of the 'enemy' is too definite and may prove incorrect. It should be explained that enemy will consist of all or any different classes of railway employees, and may include Europeans and Eurasian subordinates etc."
motion. Their attempt at upward mobility was resisted by the Anglo-Indian labour aristocracy, as well as by the European workers, who because of sectional interests could remain isolated from the mainstream of railwaymen's agitation. In contrast, the Indian railwaymen could not form sectional groupings for several reasons: First on each of the railways these workmen functioned in tight knit hierarchical structures dominated by the racist labour aristocracy; Secondly, though they shared with the whites some of the problems emerging out of the work process, such as, hours of work, gratuity, conditions of service; they had a different set of problems. These included differential pay scales, the mode of recruitment, and patronage and favouritism prevalent in it, victimization in the system of fining and punishment, medical re-examination. So only a broad based organization, representing interests of all sections of railwaymen, and acceptable to the Railway Board, could become representative of the all India railwaymen.

(a) All India Railway Conference

An effective non-political general trade unionism organized on purely industrial lines, representative of all sections of the railwaymen and capable of representing their demands through constitutional means was one possible alternative. All India Railwaymen's Conference (A.I.R.C.), an effort in that direction, was convened in February 1921 to formulate the draft constitution and the rules of the All India
Railway Federation (A.I.R.F). It selected Rai Sahib Chandrika Prasad Tiwari as its president. Delegates from all railways, with the exception of the eastern railways — E.I.R., E.B.R., B.N.R. and A.B.R. — participated in its deliberations. This attempt of the A.I.R.C. to form the All India Railway Federation found a sympathetic response from all sections of railwaymen. This association did not take up the posture of hostility to the authorities. In fact it insisted on the separation of politics from the railway labour agitation. However, its main demands were aimed at dismantling the colonial structure of the railway work force and establishing complete equality in pay, statue, housing, promotions and other benefits. More over the A.I.R.F. was not to become an association, but

76 R.E., Progs. 8, August 1921, n. 2076/4-27.

77 Empire (Calcutta), 5 February 1921; Pioneer (Allahabad, 6 February 1921; Amrita Bazar Patrika, 9 February 1921; Statesman, 9 February 1921; Tribune, 6, 17 February 1921 in; Advocate of India, 7 February 1921; Bengales, 8 February 1921, in R.E., Progs. 8, August 1921, n. 2076/4-27.

78 R.E., Progs. 8, August 1921, n. 2076/4-27. The A.I.R.C. was held at the Empire theatre from the 4 to 6 February 1921. Eight different lines G.I.P.R., B.B.& C.I.R., M.& S.M.R., S.I.R., B.& N.W.R., A.B.R., O.R.R. and N.W.R., were represented. Nearly 500 delegates participated in its deliberations. Lajpat Rai, its president elect and J. Baptista, the main organizer, were asked to withdraw from the conference, as the conference by overwhelming majority decided what the A.I.R.F. should be a non-political forum of railwaymen. Fortnightly Report for the first half of February, Home Political, Deposit, June 1921, n. 12; Also see Bombay Chronicle, 24 January 1921, 7 February 1921; Amrita Bazar Patrika, 6 February 1921.

79 Some of the major demands put forward by the All India Railway Conference were identical to those proposed by the All India Railway Labour Union of Kharagpur. The only difference was that the A.I.R.C. was not affiliated to any political current and the...
primary object was to remove anomalies arising out of the colonial structure of the railways work force. It was to exist as a reconciliatory opposition with the object of providing 'responsive cooperation' to the railway administration, but in a non-political mould. It was to agitate for the amelioration of the conditions of work and life of all sections of railwaymen. It differed from the A.S.R.S. and R.W.A. in being representative of all sections of railwaymen.

Politically affiliated railwaymen of the eastern railways — E.I.R., B.N.R., A.S.R. and E.S.R. — had refused to participate in the activities of R.W.A. because of the latter's racial prejudices. In case of the A.I.R.F., all political factions had been compelled to play a marginal role, for several objective reasons: firstly, for the A.I.R.F. to become an effective pressure group of railwaymen the representation of the superior grades, especially the Europeans, was essential. Secondly, the European workers were opposed to any political affiliation. And, lastly, the Railway Board also responded to the A.I.R.F., by giving it timely recognition.

81 For more details regarding the A.I.R.F. refer to Chapter V.

82 The Railway Board discouraged political and militant trade unionism of Indian railwaymen. In fact its policy was aimed at legitimizing only the non-political, constitutional associations of the subordinate grade employees. Such an action was aimed at arresting the process of politicization of the Indian railwaymen, and stopping them from becoming a dissenting people. It was an attempt to check the growth of an anti-colonial railwaymen's agitation.
VI Railway Strikes of 1921-22

The railwaymen's agitation of 1921-22, though being part of a larger political canvas, had focused attention on specific grievances and demands of the railwaymen: wage increase, removal of racial discrimination in pay, leave rules, bonus, technical education and service conditions, reconsideration of the subject of gratuity of workmen who had forfeited it on account of previous strikes.

These issues acquired special importance during the O.R.R. strike of February 1921 and E.I.R. strike of February 1922.

(a) O.R.R. Strike of 1921

On the Oudh Rohilkhand Railway (O.R.R.) Lucknow and Kanpur, workshopmen and other lower paid station staff struck work on 10 February without giving any notice of their grievances. The strike continued till 2 May 1921. Immediate cause of the strike was the expected arrival of Gandhi into Lucknow and the strike was alleged to have been brought about by "Gandhi type" agitators. On 10 February, 1921 carriage and wagon workshop Indian staff, Lucknow, left

83 The Burma Railway Traffic and workshop staff, Insein, struck work from 25 February to 14 June 1921. The E.B.R. workshopmen of the loco, carriage and wagon and electrical shops, Kanchrapara, (5,800 men) and metre gauge workshops, Saidpur (2,500 men), abstained from work, from 3 March to 6 June 1921. The A.B.R. workmen of all departments (8,024 men) struck work from 24 May 1921 till 7 September 1921 under the influence of C.R. Das and other Congressmen.
their work shouting "Gandhi ki Jai". They stoned the trains at the station; a European driver was hurt. The local students also participated in this strike action. On 14 February 1921, Gandhi addressed a meeting of 60,000 railwaymen and the local public at Lucknow. He seemed ambiguous about the worker's strike action. He said that he could not advise the railwaymen to strike or not to strike. However, he told the students to take to the spinning wheel. Gandhi's speech dampened the initial enthusiasm of the striking railwaymen. The O.R.R. administration though allowed the striking workshopmen to join work, their gratuity for the strike period was forfeited, on the ground that they had used severe intimidation in forcing the Lucknow running staff to stop work on the previous day.

However, with Miller's arrival at Lucknow, the strike was again resumed on 17 February. From 20 February, the traffic staff


85 Indian Daily Telegraph (Lucknow), 12 February 1921.

86 2,150 men out of 2,900 in the carriage and wagon shops, and 1,175 men out of 2,500 of the loco-shops Lucknow, resumed work on 15 February 1921. R.E., Proc., 8, June 1921, n. 260/1-74.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., pp. 5-6. The O.R.R. Employees' Association sent the following telegram to the Railway Board as regards its demands: "Workshops on strike, increments based on racial discrimination, gazetted holidays not allowed thus interfering with religion." Telegram to the Railway Board from the President O.R.R. Employees' Association. An O.R.R. Association
On the intervention of C.F. Andrews, a reapproachment was brought about between the strikers and the O.R.R. administration. Belabouring the railway administration, C.F. Andrews pointed out that the old 'ma-bap' attitude was not any more acceptable to the workmen. The men had grown independent and demanded recognition of their union. The Agent allowed all men to return to work without the forfeiture of their previous gratuity. The O.R.R. was to recognise a union of the workmen representative of the European and Indian railway employees, on the condition that its representatives were not outsiders. Here of course the Agent was referring to the N.W.R. leaders, Miller and Khan, with their avowed 'Bolshevik' leanings. The O.R.R. Union was recognised by the Agent in 1922 with H.A. Malik as its secretary, but this recognition was withdrawn in 1924 when it was discovered that H.A. Malik was also a member of the Inquilab.

(b) E.I.R. Strike of 1922

On the north western and eastern railways, threat of a general railway strike existed in January 1922, on the eve of the arrival of

93 Ibid., p. 43, Minutes of the meeting of C.F. Andrews with the Railway Board, 5 May 1921.

94 Home Political, February 1924, n. 29. The O.R.R. Union had started a weekly, The Mazdoor and a bulletin the Railwayman. The Mazdoor was primarily a communist agitprop organ.
the Prince of Wales to these regions. Since 1920 the railway labour agitation on these railways had been closely affiliated to varied currents of the nationalist agitation. As a reaction to the R.W.A., on the E.I.R., B.N.R. and E.B.R. Indian employees’ associations had been formed with the object of bringing the railway labour agitation within the mainstream of anti-colonial agitation. In Allahabad, Jamalpur, Asansol and Lillooah on the E.I.R. in Lucknow and Kanpur on the O.R.R., in Izatpur on the R.K.R., and in Gorekhpur on the B.& N.W.R., strike committees had been formed in 1920-1921 by workshopmen. On the E.I.R. these quasi-political associations were to acquire a crystallized shape during the 1922 strike.

A strike began in Tundla, on the E.I.R., on 2 February 1922, and lasted till mid April 1922. By April every section of the Indian railwaymen of the E.I.R. had participated in the strike agitation, though with their own particular demands. It had been an entirely spontaneous strike; however, in the course of the agitation, several organizations representing the E.I.R. workmen were formed. Assault on an Indian fireman, Ramlal, by a European driver at Tundla was the initial cause of the strike. A magisterial enquiry, held around 10 February, into the incident revealed that the Indian

95 Home Political, 1922, n. 418 & Kw.

96 R.E., Proos, B. July 1921, n. 1780/1-57. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 5 May 1921, Indian employees of the E.I.R. formed a separate labour union.
fireman had not been assaulted by the European and that the entire incident had been framed up by the non-cooperation agitators who had been active in the Agra-Tundla railway belt and were planning to get the workmen on strike at the time of the arrival of the Prince of Wales. The English-owned newspapers also said that the Khilafat and Congress agitators were responsible for the strike action. However, workers did not accept the magisterial enquiry report or its version of their strike action. The striker's resolution of 9 February 1922 demanded a public enquiry into the incident. Initially the strike was confined to the Indian loco-staff, Tundla. By 4 February it had spread to Agra, Ghaziabad, Shikohabad, Yamuna Bridge, and Punjab stations in the west. In the eastern direction, the loco staff and signalers had struck work at Kanpur and Allahabad disrupting all traffic. By 10 February 1922,


98 Pioneer, 6 February 1922; Leader, 8 February 1922; Statesman, 10 February, 16 February 1922. The strike was seen to be political, a part of the non-cooperation agitation. Also see a pamphlet "What led to the strike at Tundla, the facts gathered on the spot" published by the E.I.R. Indian Labour Union. This union contended that the issue was racial. For an official version of the incident after the magisterial enquiry refer to R.E., Proos, 8, May 1922, n. 215/1-91 (Part A), n. 83 (c).

99 Ibid., serial n. 13-15. At Tundla the strikers had set up a Khilafat court and sentences were passed on the non-strikers. In Ghaziabad and Allahabad the military was guarding railway property and assisting the loyal workers in maintaining the
Mugalsarai, Dinapur, Dhanbad, Bokaro and Sitarampur had followed suit. Jamalpur shop closed on the 14 February, nearly 10,000 workshopmen left work shouting "Gandhi ki Jai." By 19 February 1922 the E.I.R. strike had become general; all coal traffic had stopped with complete stoppage of work in the coal fields. Bihar Government called in the military to assist the European workmen in running essential services especially the supply of coal from Jheria and Ranigunj.

C.F. Andrews' offer of 16 February 1922 to enquire into the Tundla incident and race-relations was not accepted by the Agent E.I.R. Though under public pressure C.F. Andrews was allowed to verify the facts of the Tundla assault, but the proposal for a general enquiry into racial discrimination on the E.I.R. was rejected by the Agent because of the pressures from the whites, who

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services. Englishman, 7 February 1922. By 12 February 1922, goods traffic had halted. 19 passenger and mixed trains were cancelled, and only mail trains were running, Englishman, 13 February, 14 February 1922. With the strike spreading to Mugalsarai 10 more trains were cancelled. Bengalee, 15 February 1922; Also see Civil and Military Gazette, 14 February 1922.

100 The immediate cause of the strike at Jamalpur was the assault on a workman by a head mistry, a European. The works-manager threatened to discharge the 1,000 striking men. The labour trouble at the workshops followed the strike action of Indian loco-men on 10 February 1922. The workshopmen only joined them. The inter-locking systems were damaged and local trains stopped regular functioning. Leader, 13 February 1922. Supplementary weekly note in the confidential diary of the Superintendent of Police, (hereafter S.P.) E.I.R., 13 February 1922, in R.E., Progs. B, May 1922, n. 215/1-91 (Part A); Also see Aprita Bazar Patrika, 14 February 1922.

increase and redress of Tundla strikers. 108

Under the influence of C.F. Andrews and local Congress leaders, workers from Ghaziabad to Gaya began to return to work by the end of March after an accord had been reached on the gratuity issue. However, the E.I.R.I.L.A. continued the strike till mid April demanding recognition of the union and no victimization. At the time of withdrawal of the strike on 11 April, 1,200 men out of a total of 1,500 loco-staff of the Tundla station had not accepted the terms of C.F. Andrews. These men were reported to be under the influence of dismissed employees and were "a solid and united minority of low paid firemen who recognised no leaders." 109 Here was an instance of total opposition to the imperial Leviathan by the radical workmen of the railways.

The E.I.R. strike of 1922 was different from other railway strikes. The basis of the strike was moral: The assault on an Indian by a European. This issue was to become a confrontation between the colonial administration and colonial railwaymen.

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the differential stipends for the Indian and Anglo-Indian apprentices. Commenting on the strike in an article, "Racial Inequality in Railways", Amrita Bazar Patrika of 9 March wrote, "why should (the railways) call one class inferior to the other? In doing so it condemns the whole Bengali nation." This strike too had ended on the mediation of C.R. Andrews. It was during this strike that a workman's grass-root level organization got crystallized, led by the 'misters' who attempted to organize all along this railway line.

108 At Asansol, 73 out of 203 firemen had not resumed work. Out of a total of 3,000 staff, nearly 1,000 had not joined even after the E.I.R. had accepted that there would be no victimization. R.E., Pros. B. May 1922, n. 215/1-91 (Part B).

109 Home Political, Deposit, April 1922, n. 18.
Indian people against colonialism.

Railway administration could only oppose the strike on the 'political lines' of the Raj politically — by defending the in-built racial prejudices and differential status of the non-Asians and Indians. By doing so it could rely on the racialist labour aristocracy and maintain the imperial identity of the railways. In contrast, the native railwaymen, by opposing this imperial industrial Leviathan and participating in the Non-cooperation movement, politically asserted their sovereignty as a part of the Indian people fighting for swaraj. This strike in a totalitarian manner brought to the surface the contradictory identity of the railways as a symbol of colonial rule and as an instrument in colonial exploitation. The peculiarity of the strike lay in the fact that it was not merely an industrial action. This strike from its inception was a popular protest against racial exploitation. More so, it was not incidental that this protest occurred in the course of the Non-cooperation movement.

VII Railwaymen's Agitation, Gandhi and the Anti-colonial Mass Protest

In various parts of northern India, since the anti-Rawlatt Act agitation of 1919 till March 1922, Gandhi on several occasions evoked a response from the railwaymen: N.W.R. workmen attempted to organize an all India railway strike as a protest against his
arrest in Delhi on 10 April 1919. In Lucknow on 10 February 1921, all categories of railwaymen stopped work to participate in a public meeting addressed by Gandhi. In Karachi, on 6 April 1921, workshopsmen struck work as a part of general 'hartal' called in the city to inaugurate the non-cooperation agitation. In Lahore, from 25 June to 1 July 1921, all departments led by the Lahore workshopmen abstained from work at the initiative of the non-cooperation agitators. On the E.I.R. from 2 February 1922, following the escalation of the non-cooperation agitation, all sections of Indian railwaymen struck work, following the Tundla incident. In all these strikes no previous notification had been given. In fact, no demands had been put forward by the striking workmen. In these strikes railwaymen acted as citizens, as a part of the Indian people, fighting for swaraj under Gandhi's leadership. There were also numerous instances where Indian railwaymen struck during the Khilafat and non-cooperation agitations and sought Gandhi's intervention to settle their disputes.

To the colonial railwaymen Gandhi had come to personify the idea of opposition to colonial rule. After his participation, as a mediatary, in the Ahmedabad textile labour strike, he had also begun to be seen as a trade union leader. The colonial railwaymen confronted the railways as an employer and as a symbol of the Raj and saw in Gandhi their natural leader. But Gandhi had nothing to offer to them. Infact he neither supported nor opposed these strikes.
Gandhi's ambiguous attitude towards the participation of the working people in the national movement was based on a specific conception of Indian people and the struggle for swaraj. 113

However, the anti-colonial mass movements, 1919-1922, had accelerated the railway workers' struggle in its anti-racial and anti-colonial form. The political agitation conducted by the Congress from 1919-22 did not, in any meaningful sense, cause a mutation in the form or content of the agitational activity of railway labour in general and of the workshop labour in particular. Satyagraha or 'hartal' as a mode of agitation or protest had of course become by 1921, for the railway workshopmen the natural spontaneous mode of bargaining with the railway administration.

In fact, satyagraha, the instrument that Gandhi was using to pressurize the British was some-thing novel for the workshopmen. It was not just an industrial action but a form of moral protest. Though the basic strategy of the nationalist politics did not undergo any mutation in the Gandhian phase, 114 anti-British or anti-foreign politics of Gandhi called for a real shift in the strands of the consciousness of railway labour: The generalization of the anti-


114 Bipan Chandra, "Elements of Continuity and Change in Indian National Movement", in Colonialism and Nationalism in India, 1980.