Section III: Railway Policy towards Labour Agitation.

CHAPTER VI: Dynamic of Social Protest and Social Administration.
CHAPTER VI

Dynamic of Social Protest and Social Administration

Initially, the railway policy was directed towards the creation of a loyal white community of the European and Anglo-Indians, which was integrated into the ruling community and segregated from the natives by economic status, cultural values and by sentiments of racial superiority. Thus the superior grades of railway-men formed a part of the broader ecumenical community whose interests coincided with those of the colonial state. Though the railway at one level strove towards the creation of a non-Asian labour aristocracy, at another level the railway companies and the Railway Board had to make efforts towards managing and disciplining the vast native workforce employed in lower subordinate, skilled and unskilled jobs in their operations. Both these objectives were followed simultaneously.

I Labour Agitation and Railways' Response

Near monopoly of the labour market by the railways allowed it to recruit labour at its own terms and conditions. Even in the employment of Indians the railways were cautious not to allow the predominance of one caste or regional grouping in a category of work.
After the signallers' strike of 1899 the G.I.P.R. company explicitly directed its recruiting agencies to mix castes so as to fragment the workforce.¹ According to this practice the minorities such as the Parsees and Indian Christians were encouraged to man lower subordinate jobs.² In the pre-war phase as the strikes were confined mainly to the Europeans of the operating categories, the Anglo-Indians were employed so as to break up the trade union legacy of the migrant English railwaymen, who were seen to be setting a 'pernicious' example to the natives.³

(a) Indianization

In the post-war phase railway labour first drew attention in the national Press, in the Legislative debates and in the Acworth Enquiry Committee, 1921 with regard to the problem of Indianization of railway services in the 1920s.

¹ In April 1899 G.I.P.R. signallers had struck work demanding higher wages and a recognition of their union. The strike had got wide spread publicity and support from the nationalists, the Press and the Bombay public. For details of this strike, see Bipan Chandra, op.cit., pp. 379-85; Also see my M.Phil. Dissertation, op.cit., pp. 81-90. The replacement of the strikers presented an interesting case of the practice of railway policy of intermixing castes so as to avoid the predominance of a single caste. In case of the Signaller's strike of 1899, majority of the strikers had belonged to the caste of Chitpavan Brahamas. P.W.D., Progs, B, R.T., January 1900, n. 63-105, p. 1.

² Ibid.

³ Frank McKenna, op.cit.; Also see R.E., Progs, A, February 1911, n. 96-113.
was not just a demand for securing jobs for Indians. 4 There was a historical principle that underlay this demand. The 'natives' employed on the railways were colonial citizens who had over the course of the last few decades become self-conscious of their rights as Indians. They had begun to see themselves not as a colonial people but as free citizens of a polity where they had a natural right to compete for all categories of jobs on the railways and other spheres of social life. The post-war railwaymen's agitation of 1919-1922 was the first instance of the assertion of this principle.

4 Indianization was the general sentiment of the railwaymen and the people to control the state and public institutions owned by the non-Indians. As the railways were entirely a British-owned and managed concern, the sentiment first expressed itself as Indianization of the management and higher railway bureaucratic services. By 1922, it had also come to represent the aspirations of the mass of Indian railwaymen to compete for jobs and positions managed by the labour aristocracy. It is correct that Indianization of railway services was only to effect upper subordinate jobs such as, drivers, station-masters, farman, guards and mechanics. It was not of significance for the majority of the industrial proletariat employed in the workshops and on the permanent way. However, Indianization of railway services or the demand for the abolition of labour aristocracy and equalization of opportunity for all was a necessary step towards the opening up of promotion lines, which had been blocked up by the white labour aristocracy. It was also a way of allowing the grass root — station, shed and workshop — level leaderships to grow into prominence. The railway administration accepted the demand for Indianization. But it was implemented in a way so to subvert the process of emergence of united Indian railwaymen's shop-floor leadership. Thus under the guise of Indianization the railways reserved a certain percentage of jobs for the Anglo-Indians as to maintain their previous position. Also a certain percentage was fixed for the Muslims and Sikhs thus communalizing the issue of Indianization. For more details regarding the issue of Indianization see R.E., Proc. B, November 1919, n. 1696/2-20; Also refer to R.E., Proc. B, September 1922, n. 214/7-28.
The railway strikes of 1919-1922 were not only an attempt to restore the pre-war wages but were a loud protest against the existence of the colonial structure of the workforce. These strikes had a peculiarity. They were not a simple form of industrial protest. They often spilled into a popular protest against the Raj. On all railways some of the early forms of workers' combinations, specifically those of the workshopmen, were quasi-political and seditious in character. Often the strike leadership was intertwined with the political leadership of the anti-imperialist agitation. This coalescence of the embryonic railwaymen's agitation with the anti-colonial struggle was looked upon with suspicion and fear. The railway administration, an integral part of the colonial state, totally discouraged the Indian railwaymen's anti-colonial, quasi-political activities. Till the E.I.R. strike of 1922, all strikes were regarded as illegal. The striking railwaymen were

5 For details of the participation of railwaymen in anti-colonial mass struggles after 1919, see Chapter III.

6 Ibid. On the E.I.R. during the Swadeshi agitation, the drivers and firemen had struck work led by a unions which were associated with the nationalists. For details refer to Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., pp. 215-27. Also see Dipesh Chakrabarti, Sasipada Banerjee - A study in the nature of first contact of Bengali Bhadralok with the working classes of Bengal". Indian Historical Review, II, 2, January 1976. Similarly after the war in 1919, the All India Railway Labour Union, B.N.R., and the A.B.R. Employees' Union were led by congressmen. Even C.R. Das was associated with the activities of these unions. The N.N.R. Association in 1919-1922 was assisted by Lajpat Rai and later it came under the direct influence of the Inquilab. For the reaction of the railway administration to these semi-political strikes, see Chapter III.

7 Details of the action taken by the Railway bureaucracy have been discussed in Chapter III. See Home Political, Proce. B,

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severally reprimanded. The railwaymen's strike on the N.W.R., in 1920, was on the issue of recognition of the popular union at the time of the Khilafat agitation. The E.I.R. strike of 1922 was directed at the state and coincided with the nationalist protest on the eve of Prince of Wales' visit to India.8

(b) Early Railway Agitation and Railways' Response

In the pre-war years strikes amongst different sections of workers had aroused a varied response from the railway administration. The G.I.P.R. company realized, following the 1897 successful strike of European guards, that it had primarily employed European, Eurasian and Christian servants in key posts to the exclusion of 'natives'. But before the company could take any steps to remove this anomaly in the mode of recruitment, the Signallers' strike of 1899 made the G.I.P.R. and the railway department realize the crucial importance of Anglo-Indians and Eurasians. A conscious effort was made to include Anglo-Indians on the railways on a large scale after 1900.9

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8 Till 1922, the various railway administrations did not give any gratuity or pay for the strike period to the striking workmen. Often the leading strikers were dismissed and the majority were forced to return to work under humiliating conditions. For details of the E.I.R. strike of 1922 refer to R.E., Progs. B, May 1922, n. 215/1-91; Also see Chapter III.

9 This aspect of the recruitment has been already discussed in some detail in Chapter I. P.W.D., R.E., Progs. A, July 1903, n. 17-25; Also refer to Chapter III.
The railway administration also initiated a scheme for training soldiers as station-masters, guards, firemen, and drivers. 10 The existence of such a force was to act as a deterrent against further strikes. As well as it was to act as a reserve in times of emergency. Curzon fully appreciating the need for this reserve railway work force wrote in 1903 ... "strikes may occur at any moment in times of peace. Now conceive what would happen if similar strikes were to occur either at the outbreaks of a mutiny or during the course of war." 11

A wave of protest arose following the government's decision to train soldiers, for managing railway work-operations in case of a strike. The Railway Times saw "... this move [as] aimed to fetter the hands of all railway employees." 12 It called upon the government to set up a commission to enquire into the grievances of railwaymen.

The employment of soldiers for breaking up strikes was only successful as far as the strikes of native workers' were concerned. For example, it was effective in breaking up the E.B.R. strike of

10 Circular letter n. 1505, 10 August 1899, P.W.D., R.T., Progs. 8, January 1900, n. 63-105.

11 Administration of Bengal under Andrew Fraser, 1903-08, p. 24.

12 The A.S.R.S. submitted a memorandum to Lord Curzon protesting against the training of soldiers. Railway Times, 2 December 1899. For more details of the railwaymen's agitation during the Swadeshi agitation refer to Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., pp. 215-222, 242-244.
January 1907. In case of the European employees, the government was compelled to adopt other measures. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce requested the government to appoint a board of conciliation, consisting of representatives of the Chambers of Commerce, the Railway Board. The government complied with the request, and on December 12, 1907, a Board of Conciliation was constituted. The reaction of the nationalist press was as expected: It attacked the government for its partiality towards Europeans and for pursuing a policy of self-conscious racial discrimination against the Indians.

The respective companies and the government in the pre-war years had on several occasions adopted a partisan attitude towards the Indian employees. Seeing the Indian public's hostility as expressed through the nationalist press and other organizations, the government asked all companies to adopt a defined policy towards further strikes in the post-war years: The Railway Board constituted the Volunteer Corps and made it nearly compulsory for all European and Eurasian workers to be members of this para-military force. And it adopted

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13 Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 222.
14 The strike of the European and Eurasian drivers began in Howrah and Jhalpa districts on 7 November 1907 but extended to the whole of the line. It disrupted all traffic and also dislocated traffic in Calcutta. The E.I.R. administration and the government immediately instituted a Board of Conciliation. For details refer to Proga, Indian Railway Conference, 1907.
15 R.M.P., Bengal, for the week ending 31 December 1907.
16 R.C., Proga, A, September 1922, no. 293/1-16; Also see the new service agreement bond of the non-Asians of 1922 in Appendix A, R.C.L., VIII, I.
a policy of increasing the number of Anglo-Indians in strategic
posts on the railways.  

The railway administration had been alarmed by the out burst
of militant labour agitation of the workshopmen in alliance with
the nationalist agitation.  Wide spread insurgent agitation of
railway labour was brought under control by giving timely conces-
sions as well as by harshly punishing the leading strikers, and
rewarding the loyal staff. It successfully segregated the upper
ranks of the Indian railway staff by conceding to a demand of
ensuring 75 per cent of the superior and upper subordinate jobs to
Indians from 1921 in the form of Indianization of railway services.  

At the same time, it increased the number of Anglo-Indians and
Muslims as a part of its policy of giving adequate representation
to minority communities so as to subvert the process of Indianization.

As early as 1906, and again in 1910, the Railway Board pro-
posed an amendment to section 47(2) of Indian Railway Act of 1890
suggesting "... imprisonment as punishment to which certain railway
employees should be made liable for voluntary withdrawal from duty

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17 Memorandum Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European Railway Employees' Association, R.E., VIII, I.

18 The government had expressed concern at the political strikes
by railwaymen of the N.W.R. and E.I.R. For details see Chapter
III.

19 Railway Enquiry Committee Report, 1921, p. 58; Also see R.E.,
Pograms B, November 1919, n. 1656/2-20; Also refer to R.E.,
permission or due notice. The railway administration issued a ruling in 1914 that all employees going on strikes were "... to forfeit all previous services for purposes of calculating gratuity for good efficient, faithful and continuous service." As a part of its policy to check future labour activity, the railway administration awarded double pay and allowance to all station and running staff and staff in the engine sheds on the G.I.P.R. who remained loyal to the company in the 1913 strike. Free food was also supplied to loyal workers in March 1914 on the G.I.P.R. It granted bonus in the form of temporary increase of pay to the subordinate staff of O.R.R. and E.B.R. at Lucknow, Kanchrapara and Saidpur who remained loyal during the strike of 1921.

Further legal and punitive powers were concentrated in the hands of the Railway Board so as to enable it to tackle strikes. From September 1918 additions were made to Regulation 24 of Defence of

20 Railway Traffic (hereafter R.T.), Progs. A, July 1910, n. 70-88. This amendment to the Railway Act of 1890 was never implemented. It only remained a statutory warning to the striking railwaymen; Also see R.T., Progs. A, January 1906, n. 3-4.

21 R.T., Progs. A, February 1914, n. 58-60; Also see R.E., Progs. A, December 1920, n. 287/1-4. Till 1922 all striking railwaymen, except the non-Indians, forfeited their right to gratuity and strike-pay.


24 R.E., Progs. B, September 1921, n. 823/1-5.
India Act and the police were empowered to deal with persons on strike on the railways. Police authorities and local governments were asked to supply all information to the Railway Board regarding any proposed strikes on railways. They were specifically instructed to keep strict vigilance on agitators. Furthermore, they were empowered to evict strikers from the railway quarters under Section 138 of the Railway Act in case of alleged intimidation of loyal staff by strikers. The Railway Board instituted a special decoration for railway services rendered by Europeans and Anglo-Indian subordinates on Indian railways. Also it was decided to increase the number of Anglo-Indians in railway service through a system of giving weightage in recruitment to minority communities.

25 R.F., Procs. A, September 1918, n. 1189/1-3. Defence of India Act was used only to tackle railway strikes which had an overtly political character. Even in these strikes great caution was exercised in arresting the strike leadership, for the fear that such an act could result in creating popular sympathy for these strikes. Infact the tactic most favoured by the civil bureaucracy was to allow the railway strikes to collapse by their own failings. For details of this aspect of policy in operation see Chapter III, IV.


27 R.F., Procs. B, June 1921, n. 261-74. The practice of eviction of strikers and their families from the railway quarters was an effective tool to harrass and coerce the strikers to withdraw from the strike. In every major strike various railway administrations implemented this measure ruthlessly. The workers often resisted eviction through appeal to courts. Evictions often became an issue on which the railwaymen could appeal for public sympathy. Such sympathy was often forthcoming with the Press and public bodies supporting the workers' cause with financial assistance. For details see Chapter IV; Also, see Home Political Procs. (Special), 1930, III, G.I.P.R. Strike, pp. 3-33.


(c) Promotion of a loyal strata - the Non-Asians

The railway policy with regard to the railwaymen was guided by the colonial nature of the enterprise. From its inception the railway companies and later the Railway Board created a colonial structure of work force conducive to the political and commercial role of the railway in the empire. The recruitment of the Europeans and Anglo-Indians in the railway bureaucracy and labour arising from their relationship with the public the railway bureaucracy, as a part of the ruling community, maintained an attitude of superiority and kept a social distance which was manifested in the policy of reservation of waiting rooms, train compartments and essential railway services for the non-Indians. If the railways had symbolized the imperium to the ruling community, to the native they had come to signify its opposite. The railway had come to be regarded as a colonial enterprise. Forms of anti-colonial protest had found the railways a convenient target: Travel without tickets and disregard for privileged white reservation, destruction of railway property, occupation of railway platforms, obstruction of railway traffic by squatting on the tracks, causing derailment and accidents by pulling out railway tracks and strikes by Indian railwaymen, were a frequent occurrence in the course of the anti-colonial mass agitation. First instance of using the railways as a target of anti-colonial protest occurred during the Swadeshi agitation.

This aspect of the railway work force structure has been discussed in detail in Chapters I and II. For a varied discussion of the railways as colonial enterprise refer to N. Sanyal, op. cit., pp. 79-80; Also see Frederich Lehman, 'Great Britain and the supply of Railway Locomotives to India : A case study in "Economic Imperialism"', Indian Economic and Social History Review, II, 4, October 1965; R.I., Progs. A, January 1917, n. 169/6-18; R.I., Progs. A, April 1922, n. 229/15-36; R.I., Progs. A, March 1916, n. 552/1-24; Disorders Inquiry Committee Report, 1919-1920, II, pp. 21, 64, 70, 81, 84, 123, 207.

The peculiarity of railway labour aristocracy lay in the fact that it was a part of the colonial cultural ethos. Railways had created its institutional mechanism for the reproduction...
zations at various levels with a view to start a dialogue with the laboring men. These organizations were expected to serve the three interconnected functions of trade unions, conciliation boards and local committees. Their task was "... not only to settle disputes but to prevent their occurrence, embracing not only the ventilation and timely redress of grievances but all matters connected with the welfare of staff, quarters, sanitation, recreation and conditions of work."  

The railway administration pursued a three fold policy as a response to the first labour agitation. Initial response of the railway administration was to grant a wage-hike so as to compensate for the post-war inflation. Then the railways announced a policy of Indianization under which 75 per cent of the superior and upper posts were reserved for the natives. The object of this measure was to segregate the upper and lower subordinate natives from that of the workshopmen and the lowest paid servicing proletariat; thus breaking up the embryonic united front of all categories led by the militant

37 According to Sir Clement Hindley's scheme, local and welfare committees were to be composed of equal number of representatives of the railway administration and of the workers. The workers' nominees were to be selected by vote from each district. Memorandum Railway Board, pp. 35-36, 256.

38 Ibid., pp. 35-36.

39 R.F., Progs., B, June 1921, n. 1521/1-16; For more details refer to Chapter II.
unions on the E.I.R., B.N.R., N.W.R. and O.R.R. This was crucial to arresting the process of colonial railwaymen growing into a powerful political segment in the anti-colonial agitation in colonial India. The Railway Board was largely successful in creating divisions in the railway labour agitation. Strike committees of railwaymen in 1919-22 were effectively stifled. On the contrary, the reformist and non-political, G.I.P.R. Staff Union supported by the A.S.R.S., succeeded in constituting the All India Railway Federation. The A.I.R.F. was to grow into a non-political body often drifting towards the colonial administration and shy of advocating thorough reform of the colonial structure of workforce.

With the exception of the N.W.R. Union, the colonial adminis-

40 The initial mode of organization of railwaymen took varied forms: On the N.W.R., O.R.R. and B.N.R. all category Indian railwaymen's associations were formed supported by local Congressmen and other anti-colonial agitators. The policy of Indianization as implemented by the railways was aimed at breaking up these general labour unions along craft and class lines. While the nationalist and communist agitators attempted to forge a united front of railwaymen, the railway administration attempted to divide up general unions along community, department, station, category and even on grade basis. In this exercise the railway administration was partially successful.

41 For details of formation of the All India Railway Federation see Chapter III; Also see R.E., Proce. B. August 1921, n. 2076/4-27.

The railway administration did not recognize any of the workers' strike committees. In fact, by ignoring these embryonic combinations of railwaymen, by punishing and isolating their leaderships, and by encouraging the formation of the staff-councils on all the railways, the railway administration struggled not only to curtail their influence but also attempted to break them up. The experiment of the staff-councils was a part of the general prescriptive policy pursued by the railways in the 1920s. The attempt to foster staff-councils was not disconnected from the colonial administration's policy of forestalling the growth of popular trade unions.

In the post-1922 phase the railway bureaucracy attempted to fragment and individualize the workforce which had in the years of post-war crisis formed combinations for the redress of their grievances. Strikes were discouraged by discharging the strikers, evicting them from their quarters; and if they were allowed to rejoin work...

43 The recognition of the N.W.R. Association came into effect in 1920. It was an attempt to encourage the growth of legal and constitutional trade unions, similar to the current labour corporatism in England. However, the N.W.R. Association did not merely remain a trade union but grew into a forum for anti-colonial agitation. Home Public, Police, 1925, n. 96/III. Appendix A.; Also see Memorandum N.W.R. General Workers' Union, R.C.L., VIII, I.

44 Staff councils, committees and welfare committees evoked a varied response from railwaymen. These committees were generally looked upon as rival organizations to popular trade unions. Hence continual friction existed between the trade union leadership and railway administration over the issue of staff councils, R.C.L., VIII, I, p. 524; E.I.R. Indian Employees' Association; Memorandum A.I.R.F., p. 636; E.I.R. Union Moradabad, p. 465; E.I.R. Union Llkooh, p. 480; M.& S.M.R. Union, pp. 551, 559; R.C.L., VIII, II, oral evidence...
their gratuity was forfeited. Those discharged were not as a matter of policy reinstated on the same railway or on any other railway. Those workmen who were members of the union were harrassed and put to severe trouble for supporting unions which were considered as organs of 'seditious' activities.

In order to combat the influence of popular trade unions rival unions, recreational institutes and welfare societies and co-operative credit societies were established. These institutes fostered an

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Surrendra Nath, K 3583-91; Bhatnager, K 3603-8; Pandey, K3634-41; T.V.K. Naidu, K 5772; Also see R.L., Progs. B, July 1930, n. 219/2-3. "Proceedings of the first half-yearly meeting of the Railway Board with the R.I.R.F."


46 This had been a general complaint of railwayman's unions all over India. The railway administration had not been sympathetic towards the emerging trade unions. R.Gal., VIII, I, E.B.R. Indian Employees' Association, p. 523; N.W.R. Union, pp. 373-74; N.W.R. General Workers' Union, pp. 399-400, 424-27. W.V.R. Naidu, Khareguw, Branch Secretary, Indian Labour Union, B.N.R., was discharged in 1927. S.S.N. Murty, Branch Secretary, Bhajindh of the same union was discharged but was reinstated on the condition of future satisfactory service. Sheikh Yusuf of Palace loco shed, executive member of the same union was also discharged. R.Gal., VIII, I, pp. 532-533.

47 The role of institute and welfare societies has been discussed in some detail in Chapter II. The B.N.R. Employees' Urban Bank was established in 1909. The E.I.R. Employees' Co-operative Credit Society Limited became operational after the 1906 strike. In addition the 'Indian Staff Loan Fund' came into existence on
environment of loyalty, subservience in the upper subordinates. It was an attempt to draw the colonial railway petty bourgeoisie closer to white sahibs in culture, style of life, habit, and the value system. Having ostracized this category of railwaymen in earlier years, an attempt was made to integrate it socially and culturally into the colonial ethos.\(^{48}\) Similarly for the workshopmen the welfare societies were to serve the function of the money-lender, of providing medical assistance and a new community life.\(^{49}\) The emphasis was to ween away the workmen from the clutches of the trade unions and outside political influence. It was a way of insulating the railwaymen from the growing nationalist culture and anti-colonial agitation.

II Failure of Railway Policy in Restraining Militant Labour Agitation

By 1925, the growing trade union militancy and the mushroom growth of railway's unions only pointed to the failure of colonial

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the E.I.R. in August 1909. On the B.B & C.I.R., the Jacson Co-operative Credit Society was formed. The M.&S.M.R. had its Mutual Retirement Benefit Fund and the Urban Bank. On the S.I. R. too a co-operative credit society existed in the 1920s. On the B. & N.W.R. also, there existed two co-operative credit societies, the B. & N.W.R. Employees' Co-operative Credit Society Limited and the B.& N.W.R. Co-operative Stores were formed on several railways with the object of supplying provisions to railway staff at reasonable rates and in many ways counteracting the influence of popular unions. R.C.L., VIII, I, pp. 81-86; Also refer R.C.L., VIII, II, Oral evidence.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
policy in containing or even in destroying the embryonic organs of popular protest of the railwaymen.

After 1925 the railway bureaucracy adopted more thorough going measures as a response to the militant railway labour agitation: Retrenchment in the railway workshops, acceptance of Muslim communism in the railway services, promotion of the reformist unions led by the A.I.R.F., large scale dismissal of strikers in the communist led railway strikes and a concerted effort at amelioration of the life and conditions of railwaymen. These were some of significant measures taken by the railway bureaucracy in the years 1928-1937. 50

Railway bureaucracy's refusal to recognize the workers' combinations and redress their grievances in 1919-1922 phase had resulted in the drift of the railway labour towards the anti-colonial agitation. In the post-1925 this drift was checked by promoting loyal, reformist and non-political trade unions on all the railways. The staff councils failed to grow as workers' platform; as an integral part of the railway administration, so the sponsored unions were allowed to become the vehicles of mild reform.

In the post-war railwaymen's agitation a spectrum of labour activity had got constituted: There was the nationalist current on the E.I.R. which had led the strike of 1922. In the course of this strike a two fold division had occurred: The E.I.R. Employees' Union representing the traffic and clerical categories had separated it-

50 These measures and their political consequences have already been discussed in some detail in Chapter V.
self from the E.I.R. Labour Union, which drew its strength from the Lillooah workshopmen, supported by the lower paid railwaymen of the traffic, loco-running and engineering categories from Howrah to Mugalsarai and the workforce of the collieries of Asansol and Girdih. The reformist current on the G.I.P.R., led by the G.I.P.R. Staff Union, had spearheaded the formation of the A.I.R.F. On the G.I.P.R. and B.B. & C.I.R., in the 1919-24 strike phase, the workshopmen formed their strike-committees under various names, which however, acquired the shape of formed unions only in the 1927-1930 phase. Similarly, on the M.& S.M.B. and S.I.R., too the clerical and supervisory Indian staff was organized earlier under the leadership of the Home Rule League and later under V.V. Giri's leadership.

Primary purpose of these reformist unions was to check the growth of quasi-political trade unionism. But these unions failed to win allegiance of the workshopmen. In contrast the communist influence grew in Lillooah, Lucknow and Jamalpur on the E.I.R., in

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53 Home Political Procs., April 1927, n. 32; Home Political Procs., October 1927, n. 32; Home Political Procs., August 1928, n. 32.
Rawalpindi, Karachi and Lahore on the N.W.R.; in Parel and Matunga on the G.I.P.R. and B.B. & C.I.R. and in Hubli, Perambur and Arkanam on the M. & S.M.R. and S.I.R. Large scale retrenchment of the railway workshopmen, in the late 1920s, was aimed at restraining this growing militancy. However, the issue of retrenchment provided the communists with an opportunity to organize the workshopmen and other lower paid workmen along lines of militant general labour unionism. The communist strategy of capturing the A.I.T.U.C., A.I.R.F., and other working class forums had resulted in isolating the reformist sections of railwaymen's leadership. Thus providing


55 See Chapter V for details of retrenchment pursued on the railways.

56 Communists were most successful in organizing a grass-root organization on the G.I.P.R. Home Political Procs. (Special), 1930, II, III, G.I.P.R. Strike.

57 In the G.I.P.R. labour agitation the G.I.P.R. Staff Union, though being a powerful union, eclipsed in influence as the communists spread their organizational network. Because of the rift in the
an opportunity to the railway bureaucracy to patronize the reformist section and allow it grow as its appendage. At the same time the railway administration ruthlessly crushed the strikes of the workshopmen on N.W.R., E.I.R., S.I.R. and G.I.P.R. The colonial bureaucracy's attitude towards railway strikes provided an interesting case of the relationship of the working people and the colonial state in India.

(a) Militant Labour Agitation and Railways' response

The strikes of the 1919-22 were primarily spontaneous with

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ranks of the G.I.P. railwaymen, the G.I.P.R. Staff Union opposed the strike call of February 1930. The G.I.P.R. administration which had maintained a lukewarm attitude towards the G.I.P.R. Staff Union now leaned towards it. Similarly after the split in the A.I.T.U.C. in 1929, the colonial state leaned towards the N.M. Joshi current as the communists grew in influence. On the railways too, in 1930-34, when the communists were agitating for an all India railway general strike, the Railway Board began to give patronage to the A.I.R.F. which had opposed this mode of labour protest of the communists. R.I.R. Progs. A. May 1930, n. 269/1-2; Also see R.I.R. Progs. A. July 1937, n. 360/1-28.

58 Ibid.

little or no prior organization. However they lasted for a long period, such as, the N.W.R. strike of 1920, and E.I.R. strike of 1922. Indeed it was during these strikes that the railway policy towards strikes got crystallized. The N.W.R. strike of 1925 and the G.I.P.R. strike of 1930 present in detail the practice of this aspect of railway policy.

The railway administration, in all strikes of 1925-30, did not recognize the union in the leadership of the strike. It refused to hold negotiations or appoint a court of arbitration; for such an act would have amounted to a de facto recognition of the legality of these strikes. In the N.W.R. strike of 1920 and the E.I.R. strike of 1922 the nationalist influence was present. Similarly on the N.W.R. in 1925 and on the G.I.P.R. in 1930 the communists were in the leadership of these strikes. These strikes were found by the

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60 On the G.I.P.R., workshopmen of Parel struck work from 25 June to 21 August 1917, and again from 25 May to 31 May 1920 demanding increase in wages. This time they were supported by the B.B. & C.I.R. Parel workshopmen, who too stayed away from work. Later in the year the Jhansi loco and carriage and wagon workshops remained closed, from 15 October to 7 November 1920, on the issue of overtime and holiday allowance. The Parel workshopman of the B.B. & C.I.R. and G.I.P.R. again struck work from 10 February to 21 March 1921. On the M. & S.M.R. the Hubli workshopman struck work from 26 February to 6 April 1920 followed by the S.I.R. Nagapatam workshop staff, who abstained from work from 4 June to 14 June 1920. The engineering workshopman of Arkanam were on strike from 2 August to 21 August 1922. On the E.I.R. Jamalpur and Lillooah, on the E.B.R. Kanchanpara and Saidpur, on the B. & N.W.R. Gorakhpur, on the B.N.R., Kharagpur, on the G.R.R. Lucknow, on the R.K.R. Izzatnagar, on the N.W.R. Moghalpura, Rawalpindi, Sukkur and Karachi workshops closed on several occasions between 1919-1921, due to labour unrest. R.C.L., VIII, I, pp. 250-59.

61 This aspect of railway policy towards strikes has been discussed in detail in Chapters III and IV.
railway bureaucracy to be of a quasi-political character. However, these strikes were not declared as political or illegal. For such a declaration would have only further sedimented the political cost of these strikes.

These strikes were treated as a form of industrial protest in a political context. The use of extra coercive laws such as the Defence of Indian Rules or the Public Safety Act were discouraged for the fear of intensifying the strike and the annoyance such an action could cause in the British Parliament. Great caution and restraint was used in prosecuting labour agitators with nationalist leanings, such as, J. Miller of the N.W.R. and Swami Darsanand of the E.I.R. The cause of this key coercive policy was that any strong action against the labour agitators further legitimized these leaders and strengthened their hold over the railwaymen. However, such a restraint was not used. not shown while dealing with the communists in the N.W.R.

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62 Ibid.

63 The question of recognition of the union in the leadership of strike came into prominence especially during the N.W.R. strike of 1925 and G.I.P.R. strike 1930. Both these unions, in the leadership of the strikes, were led by communist militants. For details of the N.W.R. refer to R.E., Proos. B, August 1926, p. 2154/1-70. As regards the issue of recognition of the G.I.P.R. Railwaymen's Union see Home Political Proos. (Special), 1920, 1, G.I.P.R. Strike.

64 Use of coercive action to tackle railway strikes was not considered justified. Underlying reason for a refusal to use force, was firstly not to alienate public sympathy for the government. This issue was most prominent during the G.I.P.R. strike. Home Political Proos. (Special), 1930, II, G.I.P.R. strike. Acts of repression against legitimate trade unions drew advance publicity and embarrassing queries in the British Parliament. Home Political, 1922, n. 579; R.E., Proos. B, May 1922, n. 215/99-152 (Part B).

or G.I.P.R. strikes. As the communists were also regarded as extremists even by the nationalist press and the public, prosecution and arrest of communists gave the railway bureaucracy an opportunity to legitimize the influence of the reformists in the railway labour agitation.

In all the railway strikes the railway administration made a conscious effort to win public sympathy for its prescriptive action against the strikers. With great caution public opinion was sought to be influenced through the Press. However, in all strikes, the

The N.W.R. strike agitation of 1920, for the recognition of the popular union, had shown that any restraint in dealing with a pro-communist union only assisted in strengthening its hold over the workmen. In the next N.W.R. strike of 1925 the railway administration gave no concessions to this union and systematically crushed the strike, dismissing nearly 17,000 workmen. Agent's communiqué, The Tribune, 11 June 1925. On the G.I.P.R. too over 10,000 workmen had been retrenched during the strike in 1930. R.L. Pracs. A. May 1930, n. 269/3-31.

This policy of negotiating with the G.I.P.R. Staff Union and the A.I.R.F. was put into practice after the collapse of the G.I.P.R. strike of 1930. R.L. Pracs. B. July 1930, n. 219/2-3.

Peculiarity of the railway labour agitation was the significant role played by the Press in influencing the course of railway strikes. The Press often assumed the role of the arbitrator in disputes between the railwaymen and the railway administration. In case of every strike or dispute the merits and demerits of the strike action were discussed. Editorials appeared in popular newspapers condemning or appreciating the strikers' demands and mode of action. Liberal advice was given to railwaymen on how to conduct their struggle. In case of every major dispute the Indian owned Press supported the cause of the strikers.

The railway administration and the government was also very careful in tucking the strikes. Conscious attempt was made to wean away public sympathy from the strikers. Every step the government initiated, it sought legitimization from the...
entire Press, with the exception of few of the English owned and some loyalist papers, supported the strike action of the railwaymen even when these strikes were led by the communists as in the case of the N.W.R. and G.I.P.R. 69

During some of these railway strikes the Railway strike schemes were put into operation. Such an action demanded the involvement of the military, the para-military police, civil bureaucracy, the Indian Auxiliary Force, the railway bureaucracy and the railway police. 70 These various coercive organs of the state worked in unison to protect railway property and the loyal personnel. In case of all major strikes the burden of breaking the strike often fell on the shoulders of the para-military police and the Auxiliary Force.

Invariably, physical exhaustion as a result of overwork coupled with the political ethos of the strikers was a severe strain on the police.

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Press. The underlying reason for this carefully worked out exercise was that colonial policy must not appear to be coercive. Public concensus in its favour was necessary. As some of the railway strikes were overtly anti-colonial in nature, the nationalist Press propagated this aspect of these strikes in a somewhat exaggerated fashion. The government often sought to clarify to the public that railway strikes were not minor battles in the fight for Swaraj, but were a simple capital-labour confrontation, where the government was not the opposing party but the arbitrator. For details of this aspect of governmental policy see Home Political Proc. (Special), 1930, G.I.P.R. Strike, Parts, I, II, III, IV.

69 For details of communist involvement in the strikes, see Chapter IV.

70 Home Political Proc. (Special), 1930, I, G.I.P.R. Strike.
In case of the G.I.P.R. the communist leadership openly propagated for the formation of police unions.71

The tension of breaking the strike was also felt by the European workers who on several occasions took sick leave or found other reasons for absenting from work.72 Even the civil bureaucracy often did not share the railway administration's enthusiasm in breaking strikes.73 As most of the railwaymen's strikes occurred in a poli-

71 The strike-breaking police force was invariably constituted from the non-Indian railway personnel, who had been already nurtured in an environment of anti-Indian feeling. More so they were also immune to cut side anti-colonial propaganda. R.E., Prorg. A, September 1922, n. 293/1-16; Also see R.E., Prorg. B, September 1922, n. 609/1-11; R.E., Prorg. A, October 1924, n. 660/4-16. In contrast communist propaganda, questioning the loyalty of Indian policemen and inciting them to form unions and to rally around the anti-colonial agitation, often strained the existing loyalties of the native police force. This was noticed during the G.I.P.R. strike. Home Political Prorg. (Special), 1930, IV, G.I.P.R. Strike, pp. 167-167.

72 As the essential railway operations were managed by the Europeans and Anglo-Indians, every strike by Indian railwaymen was a failure. The Europeans as a part of the railway workforce shared a host of problems common to all categories of railwaymen. Secondly, they had some past of militant trade union struggle and could not stomach being categorized as strike breakers. In contrast the Anglo-Indians professed avowed loyalty to British rule. There was opposition from the Europeans to their being assigned strike-breaking tasks. R.E., Prorg. B, August 1926, n. 2778/1-4.

73 A detailed probe into some of the significant strikes --- the N.W.R. strike of 1920 and 1925, the C.I.R. strike of 1922 and the G.I.P.R. strike of 1930 --- showed that the sympathies of the civil administration did not always lie with the railway bureaucracy. As railway strikes enormously increased the law and order problem, the task of handling these strikes often fell on the district police and civil administration. As these strikes often occurred in the course of an anti-colonial agitation, the
tical context, the bureaucracy and labour aristocracy increasingly see in these strikes a political motive.

(b) Response to A Railway Strike:

During every strike a polarization occurred: the whites in the railway bureaucracy and labour aristocracy as represented by Anglo-Indian and domiciled European associations and other European bodies stood for a last ditch defence of railway policy. 74 In contrast the Indian railwaymen supported by the public and the nationalist Press drifted towards militant labour action. 75 Such a polarization often intensified the counterposed wills — the colonial state versus the Indian railwaymen. Each side tried to mobilize its strength. The railway bureaucracy used all its capabilities in breaking the strike

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problem of managing the strike situation often demanded large-scale evictions of strikers, protection of loyal personnel and railway property. Eviction of strikers was often challenged in the courts. As well as violence and rioting during evictions posed still greater law and order problems. The railway strikes were considered a nightmare by the civil bureaucracy which in most cases refrained from taking stern action against the strikers. Home Political Procs. (Special), 1930, I, II, G.I.P.R. Strike.

74 For a review of the non-Indian reaction to the strike-call given by the R.W.A. in 1920, and during the E.I.R. strike of February 1922, see R.E., Procs. B., July 1921, n. 1780/1-57; Also see R.E., Procs. B., May 1922, n. 215/1-91 (Parts A, B).

75 This drift toward the anti-colonial popular agitation was most explicit during the course of the E.I.R. strike of 1922. The strike had begun as a part of the non-cooperation agitation but became a confrontation of the Indian railwaymen and the colonial state on the issue/racial discrimination and ill treatment of Indian railwaymen by the non-Indians. R.E., Procs. B., May 1922, n. 215/1-91.
by employing blacklegs, harassment of the strikers through eviction, arrest and prosecution of those strikers who attempted to intimidate the loyal workers and finally the enmass dismissal of the strikers.

The railwaymen always began the strike on a non-violent note. Once the frenzy of defeating the 'szenghi' engulfed the environment, then the submissive, restrained colonial railwaymen emerged as virulent labour agitators. Mass meetings — meetings in the sheds, on the stations, in the city maidans — were held. In these processions, meetings and demonstrations, every ill of the empire was discussed and every hope of 'labour swaraj' was ignited. Meeting and demonstration were followed by satyagraha, violent picketing, mass arrests, acts of violence such as derailment of trains and rioting.

76 'Labour swaraj' as an idea began to figure in the railway labour agitation after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. It meant labour self-government. But the nature and political form of this government remained a utopian conception. But in an abstract sense this concept appropriately summed up the dilemma of the agitation of the working people of colonial India. 'Labour swaraj' did not mean 'revolution' as propagated by the communists. Yet it partially shared a conception of 'Swaraj' as advocated by the nationalists. It had some of the elements of both conceptions and yet it was different from both. Only a socialist labour Congress, representing all political and non-political shades and opinions, integrally associated with the mass struggle, had the potentiality of giving a concrete historical meaning to this idea.

77 The railway labour agitation, in its tempo and activity, was a peaceful agitation. The hypothesis argued by David Arnold that agrarian modes of violence cropped into the railwaymen's agitation is fallacious. David Arnold, "Industrial Violence in Colonial India", Comparative Studies in Society and History, 22, 2, April 1980, pp. 234-235. Firstly, use of violence as a protest form in the railwaymen's agitation had no particular relationship with the agrarian antecedents of railwaymen except...
of the riots in which the railwaymen participated, the Voluntary Corps — the whites — were the target of attack. The A.I.R. and the reformist unions often took lead in pursuing the Railway Board to re-instate the strikers. Only in case of the E.I.R. strike of 1922 the intervention of a mediator, C.F. Andrews, was accepted. Otherwise in all the strikes outside mediation was scored at by the railway administration. The railway bureaucracy pursued a policy of systematically breaking these strikes.

By mid 1930 most of the militant agitators, with nationalist and

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78 Often rioting, as different from derailment of trains, occurred as a consequence of prevalent tensions in the colonial structure of the work force. Several incidents of rioting by the Indian railwaymen can be enlisted. Often these incidents had begun as a confrontation between the Indian railwaymen and non-Indian Volunteer Corps. As early as 1906 in Jamalpur and Asansol the workshopmen clashed with the whites. For details see my M.Phil dissertation, op.cit., Chapter III; Also refer to Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., pp. 215-224. Again in 1921 during the Liloock strike a major rioting occurred in Howrah where the non-Indian Volunteer Corps and the E.I.R. strikers confronted each other. Again during the 1922 E.I.R. strike the Indian firemen clashed with the non-Indian at several places. On the S.I.R. too on two occasions in 1924 racial tension took a riotous form.

79 Only in case of strikes by European railwaymen, in the pre-war years the railway administration instituted a Board of Conciliation. Proceedings Indian Railways Conference, 1907. However, ...
communist leanings in the railway labour agitation, had been retreated. The quasi-political colouring of the railway labour agitation had been eroded.

The railway administration could follow such a policy of containment of the railway labour agitation for two reasons: first, in the colonial structure of the workforce, the racialist labour aristocracy held crucial operating and supervisory posts. Thus in case of strikes by the Indian railwaymen, the train services were marginally affected. This disassociation of the superior grades of the railwaymen from the lower grades remained the historical weakness of the colonial railwaymen's agitation. Secondly the monopsonistic control of the labour market gave the railway administration the power to effect large scale retrenchment without adverse results on the railway functioning.

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in the post-war years during strikes by Indian railwaymen no effect was made to negotiate with the strikers. Such an action would have been tantamount to recognizing the strike leadership and giving legitimacy to the strike-agitation and its demands.

80 The offensive of the railway administration was not against legal and constitutional corporate unionism. In fact in many ways it encouraged such forms of workers' combinations. The G.I.P.R. Staff Union and the A.I.R.F. were a case in reference. However the object of railway policy was to depoliticize the railwaymen and its labour movement so as to make away its popular quasi-political colouring. R.F., Pros. A. October 1928, n. 9689/2-5.

81 Details of retrenchment affected on the railways between 1925-1934 have been discussed in Chapter VI. The British railways in India maintained a colonial structure of workforce with the prime object of ensuring an efficient functioning of the railways in all contingent situations — social disturbances, frontier wars, railway strikes and other forms of anti-colonial
The Indian railwaymen in the intensive grades continued to remain leaderless. This organizational lacunae in the labour agitation at one level made them dependent on the anti-colonial leadership and political influence. However, this lacunae paved the way for general labour unionism which was seen as the most effective way of combating colonial distortions in the railway work process. But railway labour agitation — quasi-political and non-political — could only survive by being an appendage of external social forces.

In itself, as a part of the colonized working people it failed to develop its own critique of colonialism. Railwaymen's agitation oscillated between reluctant loyalty and extremely militant strike action led by the communists. These counterposing opposites reinforced each other. Railwaymen's agitation only formed a marginal part of the general working people's agitation and that too only to the extent its leadership was intertwined with it. Except for the initiative of the N.W.R. leadership, especially of John Miller, in 1921-22, conscious effort was not made to form a united front with the labour agitation in other areas.

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mass protest. In the eventuality of railway strikes the labour aristocracy was to operate essential train services, manage major railway stations and run crucial workshops. In this way skeleton railway operations could be maintained in case of major strikes; thus making all striking action by native railwaymen infructuous.
(c) Deterrent Effect of the Non-Asians and the Prescriptive Policy

The Railway Board followed a policy of labour reform whose objective was to forestall this process of politicization of railway labour and its integration into the broad mass agitation. Its policy was to encourage fragmentation and individualization of the workforce by encouraging sectional reform. The first step in the post 1930 phase of depoliticization of the railway labour agitation was a tacit acceptance of communalism. Muslim communal representation and labour organizations were not discouraged. 82

Even communal rioting in the Kharagpur workshops in 1926 and 1928 and the demand for communal representation in the N.W.R. workshops of Lahore in 1930 were seen by the Railway Board as positive symptoms of a growing depoliticization of railwaymen. 83 The encouragement of Muslim communalism through proportional reservation of jobs and/tacit acceptance of communal rioting was part of a secular process, initiated by the colonial state to disintegrate the growing indigenous civil society. The progressive absorption of peripheral communities, groups and castes into the crucial operations of state life was the unique method of creating layers of loyal strata and simultaneously encouraging divisions and tensions in the growing

82 For details refer to Chapter V, section I.

83 Ibid.
civil society and the anti-colonial agitation. Railway policy towards the labour agitation was one such area of practice.

The railways continually followed a policy of providing selective patronage to the Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Parsees, Indian Christians, Muslims and finally the Sikhs. Railway employment was such an area of state-life where this mode of patronage definitely created divisions in the railway labour agitation. Communist extremism of the 1928-1934, unknowingly assisted further the process of sectarian divisions.

It was in the early 1930s when the railway labour agitation had been paralysed by its inherent failings and outside political intervention that the Railway Board pursued a policy of labour reform. The object of this policy of reform was to complete the process of depoliticization of railwaymen and increase the industrial efficiency of the railway workforce.

IV Rationalization of the Labour Process As to Contain the Labour Agitation

In the post-1926 phase the railways in India proceeded to qualitatively change its mode of functioning. The basic shift was made from an elaborate inefficient labour enterprise to a modern capital intensive labour process.

84 L.A. Natesan, op.cit., Chapter on Costs of Staff, pp. 357-87.
In the post-1924 phase the entire railway system went through a structural change. By 1937 thorough going reforms had been carried out in all the railways. The object of this decade long exercise was to improve the industrial efficiency of the railways.

There occurred structural changes in the labour process. First, the entire machine process was in phases renovated. The rolling stock, the permanent way, the out dated machinery of the workshops was discarded and replaced by modern labour saving machines.

Secondly, the old departmental method of supervision and management was replaced by the divisional system. Under this system the ratio of supervisory staff to the industrial workforce increased in favour of the former. Now a greater regimentation and discipline in the work process could be enforced by a top heavy management. Thirdly, there occurred in phases a rationalization of the workforce. Retrenchment in the workshop of the 1928-34 was a part of this policy of increasing industrial efficiency of the railways. Drive towards industrial efficiency was only another name for changing the technical and organic composition of capital. The object of this exercise

85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.; Also see Table (3) showing the ratio of supervisory staff to the workforce after the rationalization of the railway work force in the workshops.
was to increase the productivity of labour and hence increase exploitation. Such measures could be implemented unopposed by railway labour unions because railwaymen had been exhausted in the decades-long struggle.

This shift from an earlier labour process operated on the principle of the absolute rate of surplus value extraction to relative rates of surplus value extraction also affected production relations. Rationalization of hours of work and greater facility of leave, holidays, revision of wages and other benefits — greater care for the physique, health, safety — as ensured through a better worked Workmen's Compensation Act were a corollary of this shift. Provision of houses, better technical education and an attempt at removal of racial discrimination were measures as to qualitatively improve the efficiency of the workforce. The railway administration tried to meet the needs of the workforce by encouraging welfare societies, cooperative funds and forming of staff councils as to forestall the drift of the workforce towards trade unions and associations linked with the broader social agitation. The prescriptive, divisive and reformist measures were a part of the multipronged policy to rear up an efficient colonial industrial workforce and arrest the process of politicization of railwaymen, towards becoming an anti-colonial Indian people.