CONCLUSION

Work relations on the British railways in colonial India did not evolve in its modern management-employee form. Even the factory form of industrial relations was confined to the workshopman. In fact, the master-servant contract, as defined in the Railway Act of 1890, formed the basis of work-relationship between the railway companies and their workmen. The final authority of the master was vested in the colonial state itself and the majority of the railway servants were the natives. Europeans and Anglo-Indians, a select minority of the crucial operating grades, had been integrated into the state apparatus as a labour aristocracy and as an industrial police.

Railwaymen of all categories created diverse forms of organizations and protest as a response to the multifaceted identity of the railways. The European railwaymen through strike-action, led by the A.S.R.S., prior to 1914, and under the leadership of R.W.A. after the war, attempted to create a modern management-employee work relationship. Both these attempts failed. The Indian railwayman created
two forms of opposition — non-political and quasi-political — to the master-servant contract. All over India non-political organizations of Indian railwaymen emerged, often led by the clerical and supervisory grades, but also having some following in the lower operating categories. Supported by the European workmen of the S.I.R., M. & S.M.R., B.B. & C.I.R. and G.I.P.R., the All India Railway Federation was constituted for dismantling the discriminatory hierarchical structure of railway work force and redefining the contractual relationship with the imperial Leviathan.

On the northern and eastern railways, the master-servant tension evolved as a political confrontation between colonial railwaymen and the colonial rulers. On the eastern railways, in particular on the E.I.R. and B.N.R., the predominance of the Anglo-Indians in the railway labour aristocracy and bureaucracy had created conditions of racial hostility. The Swadeshi and Non-cooperation agitations gave a political form to the already existing racial tensions in work-relations. What would have been an ordinary conflict in a corporate enterprise, took the form of a popular protest by the Indian railwaymen against the colonial state, culminating in total opposition during the February strike of 1922. The leadership of E.I.R. agitation of 1922 was provided by the firemen — the inferiors — and its political leaders were active non-cooperation agitators.

On the N.W.R., the leadership of the 1919-20 strike initially came from the signallers politicized during the anti-Rowlatt Act agi-
tation. Under communist influence, the railway workshopmen of Lahore, the emerging industrial proletariat - the coolies - created a popular agitation on the issue of recognition of their union in 1920 and 1925. Though the 1920 agitation was not itself entirely political, it coincided with the Khilafat agitation. Consequently, instead of remaining a confrontation on a trade union issue, the political leanings of the N.W.R. leadership and the public sympathy and support, gave this agitation an anti-imperialist colouring.

Similarly the G.I.P.R. agitation of 1927-30 was conducted by the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union, whose leadership included a broad spectrum of labour agitators — militant labour reformers, left nationalists and communists — of all shades and opinions. Grass-root level union organization on all major stations on the G.I.P.R., mass participation of all categories of railwaymen on corporate issues, protest meetings opposing Meerut arrests, Public Safety Act, Trade Disputes Act, Indian Statutory Commission during the G.I.P.R. strike and spontaneous strike protest on the eve of the arrest of Jawaharlal Nehru in April 1930, gave the G.I.P.R. agitation a novel character as different from any ordinary industrial action. Creative anti-colonial propaganda, leadership and grass-root level organization contributed to this genre of the agitation. The G.I.P.R. strike was not in itself a self-conscious political action of railwaymen. From the subterranean levels mass and popular anti-colonial sentiments were to surface
during the strike but subside after it. This phenomenon did not find expression in any finished programme of political action but provided glimpses into the structure of consciousness of the G.I.P. railwaymen in 1930.

II

Railwaymen formed a cross-section of the colonial Indian society. The structural changes occurring in this society found their response in the life and activities of railwaymen. Social stratification among railwaymen along community lines had also coincided with sectional divisions in the work process. In the early phase, 1897-1914, the Europeans, the superior grades, in the intensive operating categories formed unions and struck work on several occasions. The European workers on a covenant were the first organized section of the industrial labour force in colonial India who formed an all India level association, the A.S.R.S., to demand for amelioration of the conditions of life and work of all sections of railwaymen. In the post-war years this current was to further sediment and crystallize into the R.W.A.

However, the isolation of superior grades, the Europeans, from the mainstream of Indian railwaymen's agitation left the lower grades, the Indians, leaderless. This remained the structural weakness of the railway labour movement throughout colonial India. As the superior and upper subordinate grades in the intensive categories — the whites
were never a part of the Indian labour agitation, strike action of the lower grades could never be effective. With the exception of strikes of the post-war phase, 1919-1922, all strikes, of all grades, Indian railwaymen, of all grades, such as, signalers, firemen, workmen and even gangmen were ruthlessly crushed; followed by large scale retrenchment in 1928-1934. A consequence of nationality-based segregation was that the railway labour agitation did not splinter into craft-based industrial unionism; in fact general labour unionism, in an embryonic form, was the predominant mode of its organization during the strikes of 1919-1922 and even after.

This labour agitation, in its early years, came, under nationalist influence and sought active public support for railwaymen's struggles and industrial action. It was possible that the native railwaymen were compelled by the racial divisions in the work force to become supporters of the cause of nationalism. It was this racist division in the railway work force that was to promote a specific programme of agitation in an anti-colonial ideological mould. During the struggles of workmen of 1919-1922, anti-colonial ideas or the crystallization of nationalist sentiments was in process. However, this current of popular anti-colonial agitation was confined to the lower paid sections of natives, and that too it existed only till 1930.

First in coalescence with the nationalist agitation till 1922, and later under communist influence the railwaymen's agitation acquired
political overtones. However, with the exception of a few episodic instances railwaymen's agitation was never overtly political in character. But in all the agitations of railwaymen, till 1930, leading militant nationalists and communists were actively associated. There were several causes for this coalescence: Firstly, the left nationalists of all shades saw in the railwaymen's struggles a tone of anti-government sentiment and a hostility directed at the colonial state. An ordinary strike of railwaymen was at one level anti-British and yet it was not opposed to the interests of private Indian capital. This strike action, while engaging large numbers, rarely affected the shipment of goods or obstructed traffic, because the white workers maintained essential railway services. Here was a workers' agitation which the nationalists could support without transgressing the limits of their programme. As some of the strikes were anti-government in nature the nationalists tried to integrate them into the popular anti-colonial mass struggle. But the non-militant reformist current of labour agitation of the railwaymen created a terrain of labour agitation - colonial reformism - delinked from politics.

It was only during the 1919-22 phase of strikes that the A.I. R.F., the first all India level all railway workers' federation, was formed. The A.I.R.F. was the culmination of the railwaymen's agitation of the last few decades and in particular of the 1919-22 phase.
Though the A.I.R.F. first emerged in 1922, as an independent federation of all sections of railwaymen, as a form for labour reform, by 1930 it was growing into an appendage of the colonial bureaucracy. This gradual erosion of the militancy of the A.I.R.F. was the outcome of the equation that the railway labour agitation established with the colonial state.

III

In colonial India the state judiciously guided the process of formation of the industrial labour force. Through a prescriptive, divisive and reformist policy the agitation of the working people was sought to be steered towards a terrain of corporate labour reform delinked from politics. The railway labour movement did not passively accept the role assigned to it by the colonial state. In the peculiar colonial conditions, the railway labour movement failed to fight back militantly the multi-pronged attack of the Railway Board. However, the railwaymen's agitation especially the agitation of the workshopmen was a rare combination of shop-floor militancy, innovative leadership and creative modes of protest. It's weakness was objective and inherent to the colonial structure of the railway workforce and to its agitation. The railway labour movement could have only grown to its fullest stature as an integral part of the national level anti-colonial struggle.

Railwaymen, as a section of the working people, oscillated
between colonial reformism and communist extremism. But more so the
railwaymen were also colonial citizens working in an imperial enter-
prise under conditions of racial discrimination, colonial submission
and wage slavery. Thus the natural political sentiment of this cate-
gory in this society was anti-colonialism. Though the militant labour
leadership of the 1920s steered the railwaymen on to path of militant
struggle, they also steered them away by 1930 from the spectrum of
popular anti-colonial politics. By viciously denouncing colonial
reformism and left national reformism they created divisions in the
railway labour agitation which the colonial bureaucracy effectively
exploited to its advantage. It was the current of militant labour
politics, communist extremism, that intermittently pushed the A.I.R.F.
into becoming an appendage of the Railway Board.

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Of the militant labour agitation, communists, stood at one end
of the political spectrum the left national reformists, Indian National
Congress and its leadership, in its relationship to the railwaymen's
agitation, stood at the opposite end. The Indian National Congress
and leadership had no specific political perspective for the laboring
masses in India. In fact the earlier Home Rule League and Swarajist's
emphasis on labour agitation had been abandoned by the mid-1920s. This
lacunae in the programme and practice of the Indian National Congress
further created possibilities for railwaymen to oscillate between
colonial reformism and extremist politics. However, by the railwaymen's
popular agitation groped for an independent social perspective of
'labour swaraj'.

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On the N.W.R. in 1919-25 and after, on the E.I.R. in 1922 and 1928, on the B.N.R. in 1919 and 1929, and on the G.I.P.R. agitation in 1927-30, there was the coalescence of popular forms of labour protest of all categories, with the resurgence of nationalist sentiments and anti-colonialism. In all these agitations these three variables came to coalesce only during the struggle and diverged after it.

Left nationalists alone were capable of uniting these variables into a programme of mass action, as an integral part of the broader social movement. But the communists had posed the problem of revolution (as understood in the context of Russia of 1917 and after) only and not understood the question of reform. The labour problem in the pre-1947 phase was not one of revolution but only of reform combined with the struggle for swaraj. In fact the working masses could only fight for genuine social democracy if they allied themselves with the struggle of other sections of the Indian populace for swaraj and actually assisted the process of India as a nation-in-making. There could be no real reform without swaraj. In fact 'labour swaraj' was possible only as an integral part of the anti-colonial agitation of the Indian people. The railwaymen, an important segment of the working people, understood this truth in their varied agitations only incidently.