Introduction

The Raj had no shortage of symbols, but the railway was the greatest of them (even today that spinning wheel on India's flag could be the wheel of a locomotive and mean as much). It was the imperial vision on a grand scale; it tested the ideas and inventions of engineers. India was the proving ground for the Victorian imagination: the railway builders sewed together the entire subcontinent with a stiching of track.

British Indian railways had been constructed, in the latter half of the 19th century, as an all India technical system. In an agrarian economy with mud built houses, the railways, with their colourful pakka station establishments, carrying insignias of numerous British railway companies, bridges over vast rivers, shunting yards, gigantic repair shops and the moving trains over a spread out track system, signified the permanence of British rule. They were seen as a symbol of the white-man's superior civilization.

To their makers, the railways were a fulfillment of a dream of the empire: a surreality in technology, speed, colour and architecture. A significant part of this new civilization was the whiteman's clock setting into motion the trains: Trains, with their engines inscribed 'Rocket', 'Fairy Queen' or 'Lord Folkland', manned by European locomen, carrying a motley crowd - a people - passengers in varied dresses, belonging to different regions, castes, creeds and colour. Trains were to become a moving panorama of the empire. They were to signify a new idea - a people-in-the-making.

Railways were different from any other British commercial enterprise - plantations, mines, and the jute industries. In their physical spread and location, the railways had an all India presence. In their utility they were used all around the year, day in and day out, by all sections of the colonial society.

To its general user, the Indian public, the business community and the migrant workers, railways appeared as a simple commercial enterprise, as a transporter. However, to the ruling community and the colonial state, the railways were an important arm of law and order. In the absence of any other developed transport system they were to acquire prominence by becoming the political and commercial will of the Raj. They existed as 'political lines' and as a means of transport of the defence personnel. More so they were the primary means of travel of the imperial bureaucracy and the ruling community. They were also the cotton and jute rails connecting the hinterland to the ports.

The railways were, financed and constructed, owned and administered by the British. In their essential operations they were primarily being manned by whites till 1922. The non-Asians in India, or the white community, occupied a position of privilege on the railways, in compartments, in waiting rooms, and in the services of railway companies. In contrast, the natives stood discriminated against in all walks of railway life.

In the early years of their existence, the Indians had seen in the railways a 'regenerative force' and felt its 'civilizing influence'. The British railways were instrumental in integrating the growing home-market. This new system of transport had not only removed traditional barriers to the movement of trade and commerce but also accelerated the process of 'circulation' — of men and ideas. By their all India presence the railways brought closer regional and local layers of the native intelligentsia; thus breaking political

2 See Lord Lawrence's Minute on the railways, 9 January, 1869, in N. Sanyal, Indian Railways, 1930, p. 75; Also see Disorder Inquiry Committee Report, 1919-1920, II, 1920, pp. 173-4.

3 Frederick Lehmann, 'Great Britain and the Supply of Railway Locomotives to India: A case study of "Economic Imperialism"', Indian Economic and Social History Review, II, 4 October 1965; Also see G.N. Rao, "Political Economy of Railways in British India, 1850-1900", Artha Vilasana, XX, 4 December 1978.
and cultural insularity and assisting in the emergence of the idea of a nation. The nationalists while accepting the positive contribution of the railways to the process of nation-in-the-making also focused attention on the ills of the system.

The railways as a public utility service besides transporting goods, transported living historical men. The railways were held to be responsible for the physical safety and comfort, as well as the humanity and pride, of its passengers. The reserved compartments and waiting rooms for the Europeans were a continual reminder of the inferior status of the natives. As the natives became increasingly aware of their national identity the issue of railway travel emerged like a sore wound. In the columns of the Indian Press of each presidency the nationalist newspapers carried reports of humiliation and calumny inflicted on the people. Gandhi was to arouse this potential mass anathema against the railways into a live social protest. A police report of 1921 stated: "The hostile crowd ... returning from one of Gandhi's meetings, and as usual on those occasions, invaded the railway station, intimidated the staff, took possession of the train and travelled without tickets." When the station-master inquired regarding tickets, prompt came the reply. "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai, ticket nahin hai." By 1922, public hostility against the railways, a symbol of the Raj, became a generalized phenomenon. During the anti-Rowlatt Act agitation in the Punjab, there were numerous attempts to damage railway property — looting and

4 For a discussion of this issue in the native press see, Railway Department Traffic (hereafter R.T.), Progs. A. January 1917, n. 169/6-18. "Reservation of separate III class compartments for the use of Europeans and Eurasian only"; also see R.T., Progs. A. April 1922, n. 229/15-38.

5 R.T., Progs. A. March 1918, n. 552/1-24. "Gandhi's complaint to the Press".

6 Home Political Progs., 1921, n. 111.
stoning of trains, train wrecking and derailments. Again, during the Non-cooperation agitation, there were several incidents of assault of Europeans travelling in trains by persons coming from non-cooperation meetings. These were symbolic forms of protest of the Indian people against the idea and reality of the railways. The British railways in colonial India had a two-fold contradictory identity: To the British they were a symbol of the Raj but to the Indian mind they had come to signify its opposite — the colonial reality, its exploitation, humiliation and the imperial arrogance of the 'ferenghi'.

The British railways in India were the living symbol of the imperial idea. Manned by white personnel, the white railway driver and the guard, the British railways in India were the only public meeting ground of the whites with the natives. The highly graded passenger travelling continually reminded to the unfree natives their inferior status and the superiority of the imperial Englishman. In the absence of other transport land or air, the imperial personnel moved across the country on a railway system which was owned by the ruling community. But the self-conscious native must enter a railway compartment or a waiting room or accept a railway job as a second class citizen. As the natives became self-conscious of their rights railways were to become the contending place of two identities — the imperial idea and its opposite, the idea of the nation, the living spirit of the self-respecting Indian.

If the railways were distinct by their identity as an imperial enterprise, they as a servicing industry had further peculiarities. These stemmed from a complex division of labour in this enterprise. The work process of the

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7 *Disorders Inquiry Committee Report, 1919-1920, II*, pp. 21, 64, 70, 81, 84, 123, 207; Also see *Home Political Progs. A*, September 1919, n. 108.

8 *Home Political Progs. A*, 1921, n. 111.

railways was divided into numerous departments — locomotive, traffic, mechanical, engineering and miscellaneous. Within each of these departments, there was a further sub-division into numerous categories and grades; each grade with its specific functions and tasks. Thus on the surface the railway work operations appeared as an inextricable web. The formation of this labour force was an immensely complex process. The colonial nature of the enterprise, its social administration and peculiarities of the railways as a labour process, was to give a specific ideological mould to the structure of the labour force and its agitation.

The colonial character of its management and administration encouraged the employment of non-Indians in crucial work operations. The peculiar colonial character of the railways as a state enterprise necessitated for its politico-military purposes to install a category of workforce, bound from self-interest to the rulers of country. The free born English railwaymen or the native infused with the ideas of freedom could hardly be trusted. So the non-Indian, the half-European, the complex, reactive white — the Anglo-Indian — was found to replace the other two 'subversive' categories of workers. Even after 1921, besides continuing to recruit the Anglo-Indians, the Muslims, were beginning to get a favourable treatment. 10 Here were the outlines of the policy and practice of Railway Board and the Government of India in creating and maintaining a colonial structure of railway workforce in an essential services enterprise. The importance of the railways as the essential services enterprise became of crucial significance when the state was a foreign state and functioned through coercion. As the railways alone were considered as the epitome of colonialism, its servants — the colonial railwaymen — strove, through their agitation, to create the dissenting identity of Indian railwaymen.

Section I  
Emergence of the Non-Asian Labour Aristocracy.

CHAPTER I  
Structure of the Labour Force.

CHAPTER II  
Conditions of Work and Life of Railwaymen.
**TABLE 1**

Category-wise Division of the Railway Work Force

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engineering Deptt.</th>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th>Traffic (Locomotive) Deptt.</th>
<th>Mechanical Deptt. (skilled workmen)</th>
<th>Transportation (Station)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groomers</td>
<td>Porters, watchmen, Lamplighters, gatekeepers, sweepers (unskilled)</td>
<td>Cleaners - Fireman</td>
<td>Apprentice Mechanics (fitting, fitting, machine, Boiler-making, foundry, welding, carriage-building, electric fitting and wagon building)</td>
<td>Signallers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keymen, Bellboy, Messenger</td>
<td>Pointmen, signalmen, shunting porters</td>
<td>Fireman I-IV</td>
<td>Fireman I-IV</td>
<td>Brakemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mates</td>
<td>Shunters I-VI</td>
<td>Shunters I-VI</td>
<td>Shunters I-VI</td>
<td>Signallers I-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(P.W.I.)</td>
<td>Brakemen / Ticket Collectors I-IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asst. Station Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(P.W.I.)</td>
<td>Guards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Chief Controller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passenger Guards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Station Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traffic Inspector</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I-V</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mechanical Deptt. (skilled workmen):

- Apprentice Mechanics
- Fireman I-IV
- Shunters I-VI
- Drivers I-VI (Asst. Drivers, Goods Drivers, Passenger Drivers)
- Drivers I-VI (Asst. Drivers, Goods Drivers, Passenger Drivers)
- Asst. Locomotive Foreman
- Asst. Workshop Foreman I-IV
- Officer Grade
- Signallers I-V
- Brakemen
- Guards
- Clerks
- Asst. Controllers I-III
- Asst. Station Masters
- Deputy Chief Controller
- Chief Controller
- Station Masters I-V