The railways occupied the nerve centre of Indian economy in the colonial period. Railways revolutionised and helped to link the Indian economy with world economy. It brought about a fundamental change in India’s socio economic conditions. The British introduced railways in their colonial India for military purpose as they wanted to retain the “brightest jewel of the British Crown” at all costs.

In Tamil Nadu there were two railway systems. One was Madras and South Mahratta Railway and the other was Southern Indian Railway. The incentive namely five per cent guarantee of interest on the money invested in railways announced by the British government in India motivated the business interests in England to diversify the surplus capital in the railway system in a big way.
There are some pioneering studies on the subject of railways. Edward Davidson’s *Railway of India, with an Account of their Rise, Progress and Construction* (London, 1868) highlights the process in which the railways worked under the guidance of T.T. Pears, the Consulting Engineer of Railways appointed in Madras. Horace Bell’s *Railway Policy in India* (London 1894) dwells on railway rates policy which decided the tariff with special emphasis on railway rates and fares. J.N. Sahani’s *Indian Railways : One Hundred Years 1853-1953* (Delhi, 1953) vividly narrates the construction of railway buildings at various stages. Daniel R. Headrieck’s ‘*Tools of Empire*’ (New York, 1981) describes the scope of investment in railways by the British capitalists. Y. Saraswathy Rao’s, *Railway Board : A Study in Administration* (New Delhi, 1978) gives an account of the governing agency since 1905. Jeffrey Richards’ and John Mackenzie *The Railway station : A Social History* (New Delhi, 1986). discusses the role of stations played in
society as centres of cultural mixing. O.S. Nock’s *Railway of Asia and the Far East* (New Delhi 1980) deals with the various phases of evolution and introduction of railways in India. Ian J. Kerr’s *Building the Railways of the Raj 1850-1900* (Delhi, 1995) analyses how far local work force was utilised in the construction process especially in the laying of lines and blasting of the earth.

However a regional study pertaining to Tamil districts in the then Madras Presidency has not been attempted, to my knowledge, so far. The object of the work is to provide a comprehensive account of the development of railways in Tamil Nadu which was part of British province namely Madras presidency. The period from 1850s to 1940s that covers the study underwent several phases of colonialism and it is therefore imperative to see how the building of railways coped with the changing patterns of colonial administration.
The colonial Tamil Nadu then consisted of twelve Tamil districts namely Madras, Chengelpattu, North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem, Coimbatore, Tiruchirapalli, Thanjavur, Madurai, Rananathapuram, Tirunelveli and Nilgiris.

While doing investigation, the following research questions are posed.

• What were the various railway companies established from time to time in the nineteenth century during railway construction in colonial Tamil Nadu.

• Who were the important officials connected with the preparation of plan, routes and search of entrepots.

• How far the District Boards played a role in acquiring ownership in the construction and maintenance of District Board Railways.

• How long the practice of guaranteed interest continued?
What role did the labour organisation play in securing their rights?

When did Indianisation process start?

To what extent forest tracts were utilised for fuel consumption that caused ecological imbalance.

What was the income and expenditure pattern of railways?

Answer to the above questions are attempted based on primary and secondary sources. The primary data for the construction of the thesis have been collected mainly from Tamil Nadu State Archives. The records in the Archives furnish wide range of information. The Public Works Department files are very useful for building the frame work of the thesis. The reports of the Administration of Madras Presidency for various years, printed railway reports, the manuuals and gazetters, census reports, government orders of Public Works Department and
proceedings of the Board of Revenue, legislative proceedings, fortnightly reports, reports on Native newspapers, Police reports, Madras Handbooks, Indian Railways Administration Reports of the Railway Board give much information regarding the various phases of construction, development and growth. The articles from Indian Economic and Social History Review, South Indian History Congress Proceedings, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis add further to source material for the study. The books consulted are appended in the bibliography.

The dissertation has six chapters. The first chapter deals with the introduction of railways in India. The condition of transport on the eve of British rule and the circumstances that forced the colonial rulers to introduce railway network are the aspects that are dealt with in this chapter. Chapter II delineates the beginnings made in the railway building in the Presidency.
Chapter III describes the phases of development of Railways in Tamil districts. There were two system of railways in the Madras presidency. One was South Indian Railway System which had its own major trunk lines covering the entire region thereby connecting the major ports and cities. The other was South Mahratta Railway System that covered the northern part of Madras. The District Board undertaking railway work was peculiar to Madras Presidency and first of its kind in India. The Tanjore District Board and Tirunelveli-Tirchendur District Board and their working receive special focus.

Chapter IV discusses the composition of man power in railways and the service conditions of the workforce. In a labour intensive industry, labour was found cheap except during harvest season and proved to be a boon in Tamil Nadu context. Agents controlled and supervised the workforce. There was a hierarchy of officials who wastefully spent the money allocated. At the same time, labourers suffered a lot due to racial
discrimination, low wages and ill treatment. The out break of
First World War and the emergence of Soviet Union as a
communist state gave hopes to the labour to form union. The
agitation and struggle of railway workers and their role in Indian
National Movement are the highlights of this chapter.

Chapter V dwells on income and expenditure pattern
of railway administration. The Madras Railway company and the
Great Southern of India Railway offered attractive guarantee at
the rate of 5% to the British investors that facilitated the free
flow of money for construction of railways. Till 1900 the rate
of interest varied from time to time (5%, 4%, and 3 ½ %). The
state had to bear the loss while company amassed wealth. The
structure of the railway rate was designed to promote the
movement of British manufactured goods. Income was derived
from passenger and goods traffic, while the expenditure involved
many heads, the laying of lines, rolling stock, cost of the staff.

How income and expenditure of the Railways Department
fluctuated and what measures the colonial state initiated to overcome financial crisis are the concerns of this chapter.

Chapter VI reviews the fallout of railways in Tamil Nadu. How laying of lines drained the country’s wealth and ruined the domestic industries and how racial complexities aggravated the situation by driving a wedge between the Europeans and Indians. What extent forest resources were plundered under the pretext of railway building are the aspects dealt with. Urbanisation was yet another matter discussed in this chapter.

The essence of each chapter is summarised and given in the concluding part of the thesis.