

Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility

Marian Aguiar

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Rohit Chopra writes, "No symbol of Indian modernity is more contested than the railways" (299). Indeed, Marian Aguiar's *Tracking Modernity* renders precisely the complicated place that the railway occupies in the Indian and global imaginary. This book is a compelling contribution to the growing conversation surrounding a mode of transport that is now more than 150 years old. It joins the likes of Laura Bear's *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self*; Ian Kerr's *Engines of Change: The Railroads That Made India*; Kerr's edited collection, *27 Down: New Departures in Indian Railway Studies*; as well as *Our Indian Railway: Themes in India's Railway History*, edited by Roopa Srinivasan, Manish Tiwari, and Sandeep Silas.

The author begins with descriptions of two remarkably different but nonetheless arresting images of Mumbai's central railway station. The first is of a photograph of a man simply walking through the Chhatrapati Shivaji lobby with a machine gun in hand. This photograph from the 2008 Mumbai attacks was one of a few taken by Sebastian D'Souza, a picture editor at the *Mumbai Mirror* who ran towards the terminus when he heard sounds of shots being fired. The second image Aguiar draws our attention to is the final scene in Danny Boyle's blockbuster, *Slumdog Millionaire*, in which lovers Jamal and Latika are reunited and lead a dance sequence to A.R. Rahman's "Jai Ho" on the platform of the Chhatrapati Shivaji. These two disparate images that were circulated internationally speak to the complexity of the Indian railway as a cultural metaphor for mobility, modernity, and movement that Aguiar artfully maps in this book.

The introductory chapter draws upon a rich archive of colonial correspondence, travel narratives, and striking illustrations to unpack the colonial rhetoric surrounding the railway space. Not only were railway lines seen as a powerful technology with which to exert control over the Indian colony, but colonial rhetoric also imagined the shared travelling space of the railway as a leveler of social differences between Indians. As the author rightfully points out, this was a marvelous contradiction. Although the train made traveling a possibility for more people, it also accentuated social differences because passengers were separated by the kinds of tickets they could afford to purchase, as well as the whims of railway officials. Furthermore, the train with its unyielding schedule was seen as an emblem of European modernity and capable of imposing order and educating the unruly Indian masses.

While the train was envisioned to transform Indians, there was a concomitant anxiety that Indians might transform the space of the railway. The author points to numerous nineteenth-century English travel writers who despaired at the various ways in which Indians were seen to be ruining this space with their possessions, religious rituals, and, often enough, their very bodies. Here, she turns to the narratives of Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, and Flora Annie Steel to examine how the train is used “to construct binaries that elaborated features of Indian difference—the religious, the bodily, and the domestic in particular—aspects that seemed to lie outside the secular public sphere of the railway...” (26). Simultaneously, Aguiar highlights how the very depictions of Indian difference feed back into the image of the railway space, creating what she calls a “counternarrative of modernity” (26).

Yet, she is equally attentive to the discussions regarding the railway that were taking place among Indians themselves. In particular, she focuses on the discourse of a group of Indian scholars known as the “drain theorists,” including Romesh Dutt, Dadabhai Naoroji, and Mahadev Ranade, who argued that the railway construction was predominantly beneficial to the British and undermined India’s economic growth. Importantly, Aguiar illuminates the humanizing nature of their discourse surrounding the railway that was largely absent in colonial writings. These Indian scholars wrote against a colonial discourse that said nothing of the men and women upon whose backs the Indian railway was built or the Indian women who were harassed or assaulted when travelling on the train. Indeed, narratives of the humiliation of Indian women on the train entered anti-colonial protests, especially when the offenders were Europeans or European railway officials. She then turns to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualists such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mohandas Gandhi, and Rabindranath Tagore who began to question this technology-driven life as a way of being. The railway was emblematic of this concern of theirs and featured heavily in their writings.

A scholarly work regarding India’s railway would be incomplete without a discussion of the train in the moment of Partition, and the author does not disappoint in what is one of her most eloquent chapters. As she puts it, “[m]ovement took on a compulsory character as people fled their homes, fearing for their lives” (xx). In this chapter, the author examines the numerous train scenes depicted in works about the Partition such as Khuswant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Anil Sharma’s *Gadar* and Deepa Mehta’s *Earth*, among others. Aguiar articulates the deep irony in that during the Partition, this symbol of modernity and mobility often reduced individuals who had complex identities in their home spaces to their communal identities on the trains. She writes, “The trains themselves came to represent communal identities as the direction of the train signified the identities of the passengers and made them vulnerable to attack” (85). This chapter powerfully speaks back to the early colonial

rhetoric that imagined the railway as a purely secular space that would quietly subsume social differences among Indians.

The next two chapters study how movement constituted the Indian postcolonial nation. Aguiar highlights how the railway as both a symbol of modernity and mobility became a central figure with which to imagine the newly independent India. Simultaneously, she examines the fault-lines that emerge within these postcolonial representations of the railway. From here, she focuses her attention on Bollywood's relentless fascination with trains. The railway becomes a symbol of sexual desire, often transgressive and dangerous sexual desire, as well as a space for romance as seen in Aguiar's nuanced readings of *Mere Huzoor*, *Pakeezah*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, and *Dil Se*. She concludes by returning to the image of terrorism with which she opens her work. Here, she considers why and how the railway has become the very target "...for those who wish to challenge India's economic liberalization and cosmopolitan identity" (148).

While the author deftly handles a diverse set of cultural texts, the book would have been further enriched by the voices of Indians who use the railways and how they might interpret its relationship to modernity. Nevertheless, *Tracking Modernity* provides its readers with a fascinating analysis of the Indian railway's salience in both the national and transnational cultural imaginary. It is an excellent addition to existing scholarship that positions transportation as an important means of understanding modernity.

Works Cited

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