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## **The Process of Industrialisation and Emergence of Working Class in Colonial India with special reference to Railway Industry**

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**Abstract:** Industrialisation in colonial India started with the advent of the railway industry from the 1850s. The first railway passenger train began operative on 16th April, 1853 from Bory Bunder (Bombay) to Thane. It covered total 34 kilometres with four hundred people. But before it started its journey, the entire process took enormous efforts in the establishment of railway industry in British India. Railroad contributed hugely to the British domination over India. The construction and establishment of railways had a great and colossal influence on the life of the Indian people who were the real contributors of making this modern India. Railways had a long term impact on the socio-cultural life of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Eventually, many changes were observed, e.g. redistribution of population, change in occupational structure, higher income generation etc. were some of the major changes which the railway industry introduced in this country. The life of the agricultural people were effected mostly by this construction process. It transformed the agricultural farmers into the industrial workers. It brought mobility in Indian population, a new class came into existence; however, the emergence of industrial working class was the most significant feature of establishing railways in India.

This paper focuses its attention on the process of industrialisation in early period of British India. This study attempts to find out the reasons behind the establishment of railway industry by the colonial rulers. It intends to observe the course of rise and growth of industrial working class in India. This paper also tries to search the socio-economic conditions of the industrial working class of India with special reference to the railway workers in colonial era.

### **Introduction**

Industrialisation in India in real sense of term, started with the advent of the railway industry from the 1850s. Construction and running of railway industry successfully required to set up other industries, therefore, industries like, coal, textile, tea and jute plantations etc. were established in many parts of the country mainly with the British capital. The industrial policies of colonial rulers led to the destruction of traditional cottage and handicraft industries. During East India Company's rule there was no such big industries in India. The East India Company produced agricultural products in cheaper prices and sold them in higher price in developed world for profit hence didn't take any initiative to build industries in the colony. They were only the "traders". But interestingly, in the entire 18th century with the spread of Company's domination, different Indian communities began investing in trade and lending activities throughout the country. The development of indigenous and European trade economy led to the gradual decline of Indian traditional economy and beginning of the process of commercialisation of peasant economy.

During the period of 1820s to 1830s British industrial capital was in search of new investment opportunities to increase its profit margins. British capitalists initially were not willing to invest in the Indian railway constructions. But two companies i.e., GIPR and EIR agreed to build railway lines with a five percent guaranteed return on their investment, assurance of which was given by the Government of India. The total investment in establishing the railway industry was initiated from the Britain but the risk was completely carried on by the Indians who liquidated their pockets to pay the taxes. Within a few years, it became exorbitantly expensive for the country, which caused a significant burden and drain of the government revenues but still it continued the process for several years.

The construction and establishment of railways had a great and colossal influence on the life of the Indian people and prepared the way to capitalist development in the country. At the same time it widened the drain of expenditure in terms of some fallacious reasons e.g. pioneering nature of works, lack of skilled labour, ignorance of local conditions, lack of experience, choice of broad gauge, high but unnecessary double tracking etc. Not only that railways had a long term impact on the socio-cultural life of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century India. The process of Indian industrialisation and urbanisation were supplementary to each other. Therefore, a new class had emerged and many changes were noticed, different aspects of agricultural people were also effected e.g. redistribution of population, higher income etc. were some of the major changes which the railway industry introduced in the country. It also turned the agricultural farmer into an industrial worker.

#### **Industrialisation with the Advent of Railway Industry in Colonial India**

The first phase of industrialisation process did not notice any industrial development in the country because the East India Company was mainly a trader. By the late 1830s, the British enterprise and capital had already expanded to the sugar manufacture, rice and flour mills, plantation industries like, indigo and tea, shipyards, mining, foreign trade and even they invested in the banking and insurance sectors (Bhagwati & Desai, 1970; p.20). The growth, however was very slow. Lord Dalhousie, a technological moderniser introduced the railways as a tool of social, cultural, political and religious change during the colonial domination of the country. Therefore, the process of railway construction in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century had opened up the path for the development of modern industries. Railroads for India were first initiated in the mid 1830s. In this connection I. J. Kerr had mentioned that fifteen years of promotion and debate had reached the key decision in favour of the Great Peninsula Railway (GIPR) and the East India Railway (EIR) that were made in March 1849, hence finally rail road building in British imperial possession began in 1850 (Kerr, 2012; p.17).

Finally on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1853, the railroad was inaugurated officially from Bombay to Thane and the Railways exposed the people of rural India and traditional societies to the world. Innumerable advantages emanated from the establishment of railways in the country. Commercial, social, political, administrative and ecological benefits were associated with the building of the railways which provided the path to modern India. In order to establish the railroads in India British required to bring its military strength to move upon any given point of time for as many days as it needed several months now (Kerr, 2012; p. 18). On the other hand railways had minimised the transport cost and also became reliable. Commodity movement became much easier with the spread of railway track throughout the country especially in the remote places and the port towns. Commercialisation was associated with many more changes in the rural life of India, such as increase in land value, rent, sales of land, flow of income etc.

### **Impact of Railroad Establishment in British India**

Indian railways were the best markets for the British made items and all other machinery, sleeper, fishplates etc. also were borrowed from outside. Railway constructions in India brought a good fortune for the British ship owners simultaneously because from England all the manufactured materials e.g., large amount of iron and steel were required in the early stage for rail road, bridges, inclines, tunnel etc. which were transported. The Government of India took little initiations to develop the ancillary industry in the country. No expansions of heavy industries like coal, steel etc. took place in India. Moreover, the transport rates on small indigenous industries especially those situated in the distant places from the ports posed impediments towards the growth of these sectors. In spite of all, railways played a major role towards making modern India. Railway did, however, commit dramatically to intrude in the stability and balance in north Indian agriculture production by opening up new avenues and prospects of marketing facilities hence exposed the economy to outside economic premises in the country and outside India (Derbyshire, 2007; p. 177). Railways always contributed towards expansion of more strong military administration, improving the law and order situation, enhancing the commerce and interregional transaction, encouraging rural agricultural enlargement.

Railways had a long term impact on the socio-cultural life of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indian industrialisation and urbanisation were supplementary to each other. Therefore, a new class had emerged and many changes were noticed, different aspects of agricultural people were also effected e.g. redistribution of population, higher income etc. were some of the major changes which the railway industry introduced in the country. It also turned the agricultural farmer into an industrial worker. It brought mobility in Indian population. Improved transport system began to revolutionise the economic and social life specially the system of untouchability was abolished, railways provided the scope of intermingling of people from various parts of the country, irrespective of their caste, creed, religions, race, linguistic differences etc. The British colonial rulers had successfully destroyed the traditional economy of the colony and did not even supplement it with the equipments of modern capitalist economy. So, it can be said that the growth of capitalist economy proceeded towards a different path with strange conflicts, obstructions and immeasurable sufferings for the Indian people (Sen, 1977; p.21).

### **Emergence of industrial Working Class in Colonial Era**

Development of capitalist economy gave birth to the Indian industrial working class in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Establishment of railway industry in the 1850s in India provided the process of generating a labour force throughout the country. Interestingly, the romantic tales of pioneering heroism and exciting fulfilment had also a darker side characterised by incapacity, serious, errors, miscalculations and ignorance of the Indian and Indian conditions. Kerr said that it was also identified with prejudice at the less thoughtful end of the spectrum to intentional and blatant speculations, speculation, mismanagement and malfeasance at the other end (Kerr, 2006; p. 189).

Labour was the most deprived and unfortunate class in almost all the industrial countries in its inception and India was also not an exception. But Indian working class had a quite different historical background. In western countries the industrial workers were drawn mainly from cities. But in India most of the industrial workers belonged to their traditional village societies and in search of good living and in order to face themselves from the bondage of debt, these village dwellers were compelled to join the British industries. During the harvesting season they all returned back to their homelands. Another interesting feature was that only the poor landless agricultural labourer and

marginalised peasants has participated in the industrial activities purely on temporary basis. Thus, these agricultural labourers could not become complete industrial workers and could not even get rid of casteism, racialism, superstition and harmful religious beliefs of middle ages. As a result of which it took more than three decades for the Indian workers to emerge and consolidate themselves as a separate class and establish their own distinct position and identity in the social and economic system. Thousands of men, women and children were employed in the building of railways. Railway construction works required a good number of workers who were divided into various categories such as age, gender, culture, language, religion, skilled, unskilled etc. The railway workers had to work in the worksites where rail roads, bridges, tunnels, incline were constructed. The wages were too meagre hence the entire family had to work together for the survival.

Railway workers were bound to be mobile. They had to move from one work site to another. There were a vast variations observed amongst the railway workers. Firstly, the difference was found between the men with that of the women and children on the basis of physical strength. Secondly, there were different types of unskilled works e.g. those who were engaged in digging of earth and rock, called excavators and those who carried these earth, rock and brick to the worksites were known as labourers. Coolies used to carry heavy burden in the construction sites of bridge and tunnel and excavators were mainly the children and women. Thirdly, another type of distinction was noticed between those who were effectively efficient at earth work and those who were less effective. The former were more experts in earth works or had more physical strength to finish more rock and earth works per day than the other. These skilled workers were termed as floating groups and these workers were viewed as more reliable as they came from distant places. Thus they did not have the tendency of going back to their villages for agricultural occupations. The existing artisan class carpenters, blacksmiths, masons etc. were engaged in railway constructions works in the various parts of the country. These skilled and trained workers were much needed for bridge and tunnel buildings. Interestingly, it can be said in the background of the railway establishment during the colonial era a change in social structure was observed in the traditional Indian society.

#### **Nature and Conditions of Working Class in British Indian Railways**

Many difficulties and hardships had to be overcome, many lessons, some involving considerable human or financial cost had to be learned, triumphs more or less and individual loss occurred often. In the early days when large bridges were constructed out of which some got demolished as a result several construction workers were killed due to these accidents. Apart from this, as and when the epidemic diseases broke out in the work sites the entire assembled work force passed away. Young labouring children infant of their parents died due to the accidents. Not only them the engineers, contractors, colonial officials, skilled workers also passed away during this phase. In large number of worksites, sudden breakouts of epidemic diseases like cholera, kala jar, typhoid, small pox etc. killed huge number of workers. Among all these diseases malaria was the most deadly one. The reason behind the spread was mainly due to the unhealthy living conditions of the workers in the construction sites, a large number of masses stayed together without a proper sanitary system and in an atmosphere where there was no room for fresh air to breathe. The people who suffered a lot and sacrificed their lives in making modern India, still remained in dark and stories of immense misery were left untold.

Construction of Bhore Ghat inclines was the most toughest amongst the all, it took almost eight years of continuous effort which faced a lot of obstacles, huge loss of lives were associated with it. Weather and other threats like accidents etc. also existed. The workers did not have any

limitation on working hour, sometimes; they worked for twenty hours long at a stretch. In the later decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century the system of shifting duties was introduced in the worksites and the electrification system made it possible to continue the work without any break. Toiling men worked like devils. They had to work under glaring sun, flood waters, rains, chilling winters, sand, flames, noise etc. As the construction works had been continued to develop, the workforces became more easily managed and provided better sanitation, housing and medical facilities. The early days of the railway establishment were really strenuous, fatiguing and adverse for the life of the Indian workers. Throughout the early period of railway construction works the engineering community was mainly from England. The racial consideration played a major role in this regard.

The system of payment in the railway industry was quite amazing. Exploitation and deprivation were common and widespread. John Hurd observed that when productions were becoming more labour intensive, productivity of labour had invariably increased therefore, the combination of the change in management practices and labour’s learning by doing must overcome the growing troubles in the industrial productions and technology must improve the negative effects on the number of workers (Hurd, 2007; p.339). But unfortunately, wages remained always low for those who worked hard. Therefore, the earth work done by an unskilled worker was Rs. 2-8 per one thousand cubic feet. The wages of masons and other skilled workers were little higher. The following table indicates the real picture of the wage system in the industries including the railways.

**Real Wages (1890-95 = 100)\***

Class of Labour	Average of Year			Year	
	1895+0	1900+0	1905+0	1910	1912
	1899	1904	1909		
<b>*Rural</b>					
Agricultural Labour	103	120	123	134	138
Village Artisans	105	122	124	135	138
<b>Urban</b>					
Skilled Labourer	104	119	120	132	134
Unskilled Labourer	106	122	126	135	145
Domestic Servants	100	111	108	117	116
<b>Cities</b>					
Skilled Labourer	105	118	120	131	130
Unskilled Labourer	104	117	120	131	132
Domestic Servants	102	113	111	118	115
<b>Industries</b>					
Jute	105	113	105	109	106

Cotton	101	106	100	106	106
Tea	101	96	90	98	95
Mining	105	129	128	148	137
Railways	97	99	97	108	101

**Enquiry into the Rise of Prices in India by K.L. Dutta, M.A.I., pp. 169-170; (Buchanan, 1966; p. 357)**

### Conclusion

Industrialisation had not brought about much change in the economic life of the colonial people. Over the period, the British entrepreneur had developed the cheapest and most reliable method of carrying on the construction works, might be dangerous because it involved the direct supervision of the private railway companies and after 1870s, by the state itself. Payment structure was different between the Indian and the Europeans. Indians were less paid for the same work than the Europeans or the Anglo Indians. According to historians Indian employees got slower promotion and less amenities including housing and medical relief and allowances for children's' educations (Menon & Mahajan, 2006; p.158).

By 1905 more than 25000 route mile were built and operated by different organisation much as private companies, state owned or managed by princely states. Railway workshops also employed a good number of workers and people started moving across the length and breath of the subcontinent. Interestingly, a bulk of railway workers were semi-proletariat because construction work was not the only way to their livelihood, they took it as temporary jobs and were more involved in village economy. In the early 1860s, several incidents of workers' resistances took place in different railway worksites, e.g. coolies in Trichinopoly district of Madrass or the workers of the Eastern Bengal Railway were able to convince their employers to sufficiently rise the rates of the earth work. Railway construction workers proved to be of the most militant nature. Most important of all was the eruption in Bhore Ghat in 1859 where the working and living condition were always very harsh, unhealthy and dangerous as well. Above all the rate of payment was low and many times the payments were made late and less than what they were promised, therefore, they became furious and the coolies attacked the Europeans, the main reason of resentment was wage. Strikes and other modes of violent resistance were very common in the pre-independent era throughout the country. A few trains were bombed or otherwise disrupted. Railroad workers took up the nationalist cause with enthusiasm and labour grievances were intermingled with patriotic feeling and as a result of which a series of strikes by railroad workers had occurred in the railway industry. In the early twentieth century the nationalist movement also provided the necessary impetus to the railway workers movement. All India Railwaymen's Federation, the trade unions for the railway workers had the objective to support the freedom struggle of the country. In 1927, 2500 workers went on strike at Kharagpur supported by the workers at Liluah and led by the communists. A report stated that the six months strike was bloody but united, the twenties saw widespread strike not so the thirties (Menon and Mahajan, 2006; p. 161).

Railroad was the device of change towards social, cultural, moral, religious and political conditions of the millions and conceived it as a vehicle of modern India. Mark Tully regretted that though, the

days of the Raj were now long gone, but the colonial legacy still survived. The Indian railways were considered as symbols of authority, so whenever there were strikes or disturbances in the country the railways became always the first and the soft target of the protestor's (Tully, 2006; p. 240).

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