

Railway Development in Colonial Punjab: Social and Cultural Assimilation

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Abstract: This paper traces the story of development of railway in Punjab under the British rule. How modernisations and alternations came with the coming of railway especially in the respective areas discussed however these developments were largely linked with economic, political and administrative interests. Even then some allied transformation came in the Punjab region. On the other side this region became the flashpoint ground of British army recruitment and it added the more importance to Punjab. This paper builds up in the reference of railway development in colonial Punjab in general, especially focusing on railway connectivity of military cantonments and led to social and cultural assimilation in particular.

Keywords: colonialism, railway, urbanization, migration, socio-cultural assimilation.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Asia which includes the present day India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka has been a region that attracted explorers, traders and invaders from ancient times onwards. It is pointed out that the invaders included the Aryans, Mongols, Mughals and Turks who used the land route to reach the rich South Asian subcontinent through the great passes of North Western areas. The same richness of the subcontinent attracted the Europeans from the fifteenth century onwards which changed the course of its subsequent history. The British East India Company, which came to explore and exploit the chances of trading in the wealthy subcontinent, subsequently became the masters of the land and brought sweeping changes in the fields of education, military, economy, society, judiciary, civil administration, communication, law and order in the South Asia. Thus The British rule changed and transformed the face of South Asia.

It is pointed out that Punjab anticipated importance in the history of British Indian Empire after the revolt of 1857. It became a turning point as it led to reconstruction of the British Indian army at a very large scale and Punjab became the major recruitment ground for the British. Militarising Punjab thus was essential to guard the region from external attacks through the Western route. Apart from its strategic location, Punjab occupied a special place in the British defence plan due to the perception of an impending attack from the Russian Empire under the dynamics of the Great Game. In the defence of this threat British started to develop well connected communication system in which railway, road and telegraph came into existence in the Punjab and further these infrastructure developments created employment in huge amount which kicked the process of urbanization and migration which led the social and cultural assimilation and unification in colonial Punjab.

In this paper I have attempted to trace the story of railway development in colonial Punjab and purposes to build up, without missing the railway connectivity between the military cantonments in the respective region. Further how railway connects the people to each other and social and cultural amalgamation takes place will be discussed enlarge and further multifaceted transformations bestow by colonial railway in the economy, society and culture and various other aspects. For the completion of this research paper, Primary reports, Gazetteer, Books, scholarly Articles and web have been used.

2. INITIALIZATION OF RAILWAY: PUNJAB AS A TYPICAL POINT

Transport is an important infrastructure inevitable for the developmental process of a country. The progress of a country depends upon the availability of a viable system of transport facilities. Without proper means of transport and communications it may not be possible for any government to administer a vast country like India. Indian Railways

played a crucial role in the economic development and national integration of our country. It has brought about remarkable changes in the economic, political, social and cultural life of the country. The Indian Railway system today is the largest state owned enterprise in Asia and the second largest state owned Railway system in the world. The introduction of Railways, which is one of the legacies of the British rule in India, has not only caused remarkable increase in the quick communication between different parts of India but also brought about profound changes in the habits and outlook of the people. In this discourse, some regions got special importance due to some geographical and strategic obligations. In this reference Punjab have a peculiar region (Talbot 2007: 4).

3. RAILWAYS, ROADS AND COMMUNICATIONS: CANTONMENTS AS A SOURCE OF CONNECTIVITY

Annexation of Punjab took place in 1849 and immediately after that the board of administration constituted, under whom a lot of structural changes in the administration added. In the revolt of 1857, Punjab region remained loyal towards the colonial people and played a crucial role to sustain & maintain the empire in Indian subcontinent. So in revert of this loyalty British introduced a lot of new inventions like construction of canal colonies, railway, roads and workshops, introduction of fertilizers & seeds (Talbot 2007). Due to these Punjab transformed from a barren land into a one of the fertile region of the Indian subcontinent. From all these, initialization of railway was the most important from defence as well as commercial point of view.

As upper stated, due to the strategic position of Punjab, the British invested handsomely on connectivity and mobility by establishing networks of railway and roads in these areas. The military cantonments were joined each other through railway and roads, though these links were developed and operated essentially to satisfy the administrative, commercial and military needs to sever the colonial interests (Kerr 2012). For instance, in the Lahore cantonment two railway stations were established; one at Meean Meer east, on the line from Lahore to Delhi and second at Meean Meer west, on the line from Lahore to Multan (Lahore District Gazetteer 1883-84: 164). These military stations were linked with other strategic stations of the north and other corners of the British territory. The development of transport and communication links brought immense change to Lahore region, which according to the British “was utterly waste and desolate for a long time after the annexation in 1849” (Lahore District Gazetteer 1883-84: 164-166).

The historic Grand Trunk Road is an ancient and important trade route that runs from Kolkata (Calcutta) in the east, up to Delhi and on to the west (present-day Pakistan). It is one of the longest roads in the world and the British started improvements on this route in 1839 (The Punjab: Moving Journeys (Part One) 2004: 8). Further, from the 1840s large-scale road construction projects to link the main cities of India were also initiated (The Punjab: Moving Journeys (Part One) 2004: 8). The Grand Trunk road from Kalka to Shimla was opened for carts and traffic of every kind and along the roads the Dak bungalows were constructed which provided comfort to the European servants in particular (Shimla District Gazetteer 1888-89: 80). Beside this there were eleven D.P.W. bungalows on the Kalka road, situated at distances varying from 8 to 16 miles. It was also a time when wide roads began to be constructed in India and during the British rule the minimum width of the roads were six feet (Shimla District Gazetteer 1888-89: 80).

However, the investments were much more on the railways. The importance of the railway system in India for military purposes was recognized right at the outset and great stress was laid on this in Lord Dalhousie’s minute of 1853. But until the outbreak of the Afghan War, at the end of 1878, no comprehensive views had been taken of the interconnection of our frontier communications, nor any program laid down for railway construction for purely or mainly military objects (Bogart and Chaudhary 2012: 3-4). However, after 1860 the British started to invest in strategic cum commercial railway and road communication and the links between Multan, Peshawar and Lahore were laid in the early second half of the nineteenth century (General Report on the Administration of the Punjab Territories 1856: 50).

The railway station at Lahore was opened in 1862, which provides an expression of the connection between railways and the colonial state at a time when the latter was threatened (Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933: 290). The Lahore station was built as a defensible structure at a time when the British in India were just recovering from the greatest threat to their rule in India, the widespread troop mutinies and civil uprisings of 1857-58 and during this time emergence of the railway network was seen as vital security role in the maintenance and strengthening of British colonial rule (Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933: 290). Amritsar was the junction for Pathankot at the foot of the hills during this time and the British constructed originally the main railway lines with the help of *Scinde* railway company and the first portion from Amritsar

to Lahore was laid down in 1862 and this was the first section of railway opened in the Punjab during the colonial epoch (Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933: 290). And the extension of railway lines from Amritsar to Delhi was begun in 1864 (Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933: 291). In 1873 a new railway lines opened between Lahore cantonment and Karachi port which also connected the Montgomery and Multan cantonments to these important trade centres (Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933: 291). As a result these cantonments were commercially and militarily got connected with Lahore, which was the most important cantonment at that time (Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933: 291).

Sindh, Punjab and Delhi railway was opened to Multan in 1865 and the Indus valley state railway from Multan to Kotri was opened in 1878. Subsequently, railway workshops were established at Lahore and many other places.¹ Since, Kotri was the busiest river port city well connected with the Karachi port, the new railway joined Multan to Kotri and established connection with the seaboard, which augmented the commercial importance of the Multan and from the militarise point of view it was connected with other military cantonments by sea routes (Multan District Gazetteer 1883-84: 154).

While the Sind, Punjab and Delhi Railway Company constructed lines linking Lahore to Amritsar (formally opened 1862) and Lahore to Multan (operational in late 1864) and Amritsar to Delhi (in 1870), connection from Lahore to Karachi was established in 1878 as the result of the completion of the Indus Valley State Railway (Kerr 2012: 12). On the other hand, the Punjab Northern State Railway joined Lahore and Peshawar cantonments in 1883 (Kerr 2012: 12). Thus, by 1886 the government owned and operated North Western State Railway (later North Western Railway) was created by amalgamating most of the railways in Punjab and Sind and afterwards in a huge amount workshops were joined with these railways stations and railway lines, changing history of transportation and connectivity of the region (Kerr 2012: 12).

Even places like Ambala were connected to the railway network due to the cantonment. The opening of the north-western railway connected Ambala with Rajpura (which was 9 miles far away the Ambala district), Simbhu (6 miles), Ambala city (7 miles), Ambala cantonments (6 miles), Mustafabad (8 miles), Jagadhri (3 miles). From Rajpura there was a branch line to Patiala and Bathinda, where a junction was joined with the Delhi line. These railway links thus increased the importance of Ambala, by connecting it with other parts of the country. It also facilitated the linking up various cantonments at different places, which speeded up the mobility of the troops and arms and ammunitions from one military cantonment to the other (Bogart and Chaudhary 2012: 9).

Another line under the name of "East Indian railway" runs through the Ambala district joined Ambala Cantonment with Chandigarh (which was 10 miles from Ambala cantonment) and Kalka (only 9 miles far away from Ambala cantonment) and mainly it was built for the military purposes (Bogart and Chaudhary 2012: 9-10). The Ambala district was connected to the rest of the country through roads as well, in which the Grand Trunk road was the major one. The G.T. road arrived at Ambala cantonment from the Karnal. The British also constructed the Ambala-Kalka road (for Shimla) and it was connected to the G.T road 4 miles above the Ambala cantonment (Ambala District Gazetteer 1923-24: 99). This made it easy for the mobilization of people and troops to the summer capital of Shimla for the British as steady communication and transport developed between Ambala, Shimla, Multan, Lahore and Delhi (Ambala District Gazetteer 1923-24: 104-05).

The construction of railway lines and the network of railway workshops generated employment opportunities. The following table shows then case of Lahore workshops alone.

Table: 3.9: Employment in the Railway Workshops of Lahore, 1870-1929

Approximate Date	Approximate Numbers Employed Daily
1870	1000
1880	2000
1890	2500
1906	4500

¹ Kotri was a large town during the British rule and it was situated on the right bank of the Indus in Sindh. In the 19th century it was the busiest river port and it was well connected with Karachi and Sindh, Multan and Lahore for the commercial purposes. Available At: <http://www.railnews.co.in/?p=275/> (Accessed on 22 Nov. 2013).

1911	7000
1916	10,000
1925	10,600
1929	12,200

Source: Kerr 2012: 14, Table 1

Besides the labour works many other forms of the railway employment also came into being like clerical work, engineering, etc. (Kerr 2012: 12-13). Such employment avenues increased immigration into such cantonment cities, changing their social composition. While Europeans were employed at the supervisory and highly skilled jobs, the ordinary workers were mobilised from the natives (Kerr 2012: 15).

This was the case of most of the cantonment cities and towns, which were connected by railways and roads for military purposes, creating huge impact on the social and economic life of such places. In places like Sialkot which was connected with railway and good metalled roads, its local business, like the paper manufacturing in Sialkot, flourished (Sialkot District Gazetteer 1883-84: 91-92). The Delhi station emerged as the largest junction in northern India during the British rule and the East Indian railway crosses by the Yamuna Bridge from Ghaziabad (Delhi District Gazetteer 1912: 164). and East Indian Railway connected (since 1891) the Delhi-Ambala-Kalka to each other and when the southern Punjab railway was opened in 1897 and this improved connectivity among the Rohtak, Jind, Bathinda, Bahawalpur, Firozpur and Lahore (Delhi District Gazetteer 1912: 165).

The new networks of transport also resulted in the emergence of a few other cities into greater significance. An example would be Karachi, which was a much smaller colonial-port than others in the beginning of colonialism but with the uninterrupted railway connection to Punjab and Sindh and onwards to Delhi by 1889, converted Karachi into one of the biggest ports, for the export of raw material from India and import of the manufactured goods from Britain (Kerr 2012: 12).

It is clear that the British government was keen to exploit the railway's inherent potential to consolidate its grip over India. During the time of Dalhousie most of railway links constructed were from the commercial and strategic point of view to facilitate the trade and troops' movement (Maitra, Maitra 1997: 25-26). But as pointed out already, this has greatly transformed the social and economic life of Punjab. The British also placed Sarais (it was like a rest house special built on the roads for the traveller) for the comfortable mobilization of the people in the every district, which was placed on the various roads of the Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan, Amritsar, Firozpur, Peshawar, Delhi etc. and due to these Sarais communications have vastly upgraded and from the commercial point of view, apart from helping the British in the exploitation of rich geography of the Punjab (Rawalpindi District Gazetteer 1893-94: 152-155).

4. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASSIMILATION & AMALGAMATION

The increasing presence of the Europeans due to cantonments and institutions of modern education exposed the local population to the modern western culture and provided chances of learning. The missionaries played an important role in this, though their primary aim was to spread the Christian religion, as they spread the western education alongside, it build the solid path for the exchange of culture and values (Aujla 2012). As the British built connectivity across the province and beyond, connecting people and facilitating movement of goods, along with trade human interaction among these cities of the Punjab also increased substantially. It is said, for instance, Firozpur, Lahore and Amritsar started developing into one composite cultural triangle due to the easy connectivity across them. The barriers of spoken dialects started breaking over a period of time, and cultural affinities developed like never before (Aujla 2012).

The opportunity colonialism provided to the people of Punjab to emigrate and see the wider world also opened up spaces for cultural assimilation. As many youngsters from peasant backgrounds were enlisted in the British Indian army and fought two world wars, many of them had the chance to visit a number of countries as part of their military assignment (Soherwordi 2010: 20). When they returned to Punjab, these soldiers were impressed by the magnificent civic life in the West, as they had seen in London and Paris (Soherwordi 2010: 20). Their interaction with the educated class, especially women, led them to reflect on the status of woman in Europe and in their respective villages in Punjab (Soherwordi 2010: 20). High levels of cleanliness and sanitation and the engineering amaze in the form of their underground train network all left a gigantic impression on the Indian soldiers, as collections of their letters reveal (Soherwordi 2010: 21). Back home

they were dipped with new thoughts and concepts, leading to efforts to make changes in their lives and surroundings (Soherwordi 2010: 20-22). Thus their exposure to the outside world brought not only prosperity but also positive mentalities in soldiers' lives (Chatta 2012: 201). Their status as part of the British Indian army has been seen as a social capsule which helped them to raise to a new social status and acquired a new influence in society (Chatta 2012: 202-204). The folk songs of the time richly captured the growing influence and social clout of soldiers in the society (Soherwordi 2010: 20-22). The new life and structures brought by the cantonments and allied development also resulted in change of mentalities in India, giving way to its modernity. Western education played the dominant role in this transformation, alongside other development like modern health and communication infrastructures whereas, unification of India through new transport infrastructures and through the language of English, facilitated interaction and exchanges across India, leading to greater cultural assimilation and to nationalist imaginations within the country.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the concluding remarks, we can say that British established a world largest railway system in India and in this whole discourse, frontier areas and locations remained most important. In this case Punjab got remarkable changes and modifications under the British rule due to its strategic position and some allied compulsions (Russian expansionist policy, Marital Races etc.) which inspired the colonial masters to build up a world largest railways in Punjab. Further due to the construction of railway lines, Punjab connected internally and externally with the other places which kicked the trade, urbanization and migration aspects. On the one hand it provided an opportunity to upward in the society and on the other hand generate employment to the people. In spite of this, all these things contributed a lot to assimilate the social and cultural aspects during the colonial rule in Punjab.

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