

STRANGE TALES OF CONSTRUCTION OF RAILWAYS IN INDIA

-P.K.MISHRA

England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating- the annihilation of the old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western Society in Asia"

--Karl Marx

Construction of Railways in India was primarily to stamp superior technical prowess of west and to unleash the forces of industrial revolution, which west has mastered in annihilating the distance. Yet, there was romance and legend, too, amidst the dust and smoke raised during civilization mission. "Iron and steam has civilized the mankind, let's give India the benefit of discovery", became the catchphrase during the era.

The transformative power of Railway modernity was reported by the Overland Telegraph and Courier: *"the superstition of the ages seemed to melt away as the gigantic reality of steam and mechanism passed before their [the Indians'] eyes."*

Paper heralded the first run of the Railway as *"a triumph, to which, in comparison, all our [British] victories in the East seem tame and commonplace."*

It was believed that the Railway system and its motive power of steam had the ability to completely reshape not only locomotion and landscape, not only time and space, but the very nature of humanity itself. Railways opened interior markets to manufactured goods, provided relief for famine victims, and served as a lesson in civilization and progress for the Indians who were lucky enough to build, ride, or even just see it.-- Michael Freeman, Railways and the Victorian Imagination

John W. Mitchell, Assistant Traffic Superintendent of BNR, in his book *"The Wheels of Ind"* published by Thornton Butterworth Ltd London in 1934, citing primary sources, narrates two strange tales which were not in conformity with sharp ideological construct celebrating the European modernism steam-rolling timeless traditions and beliefs of the east.

"By Nine miles from Bhojudih on the Grand Chord line we come to the little station of Talgaria. As the line approaches the platform it jerks sharply to the right to resume the straight again past the station. In the centre of the long stone platform is a large octagonal-shaped hole, carefully delineated and covered over with movable steel plates. On certain days the centre plates are removed, exposing a hole only a few inches deep. Into this tomb-like vault the pious folk drop offerings of flowers together with their simple prayers."--

Mitchell was quite intrigued at the unusual sight of a shrine on a station platform and asked the Engineer, who had surveyed & constructed these lines.

After the discovery of Jheriah and Bokaro coal fields, there was a mad rush amongst Rail companies to own collieries and grab the share of lucrative coal traffic as EIR had virtual monopoly over the earlier discovered Ranegunge coal fields turning it into lowest cost Rail carrier.

“But as soon as the East Indian Railway constructed a line into the centre of the field, Coal Companies were formed, sidings applied for faster than they could be put in, and a rush of traffic came which was so sudden that it was almost beyond the power of the railway to carry it. The consequence was that the Railway, while making the most strenuous efforts to provide additional facilities, was blamed instead of thanked, and the public, thinking no doubt that competition would lead to further reductions in rates, clamoured for the admission to the field of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway. The Government allowed this other line in, to compete for the traffic of the Jheriah collieries, created by the enterprise of the East Indian Railway alone. But after this was accomplished the Bengal-Nagpur Railway found that it could not compete for the important Calcutta traffic because of its longer lead to that port, and because of the fact that the Government would not allow it to quote rates for the traffic below the sanctioned minimum”- The History of the East Indian Railway by George Huddleston.

In one of earliest recorded case of lobbying by Rail companies, BNR, in association with Bengal chamber of commerce and Bengal coal companies, was successful in getting toe hold in coal fields after intense campaign. Government of India permitted BNR to lay tracks in coal fields of Bengal.

The report of Bengal chamber of commerce 1899-1900 volume 1 page number 29 gives a summary of events.

“On the 17th June, 1899, the Committee received an intimation from the Consulting Engineer to the Government of India for Railways, that he proposed holding a meeting at Calcutta, on the 14th the question of the best means by which the Railway might be afforded access to the Jheriah Coalfield, having regard to the interests of the public, the mine-owners, and the two Railway Companies concerned.

Mr. D. F. Mackenzie, of Messrs. Macneill & Coand Mr. C. W. Gray, of the Bengal Coal Co. Ltd., were elected as representatives of the Chamber. The Indian Mining Association nominated Mr. A. K. Muir. of Messrs, Finlay, Muir & Co., and Mr. R. P. Ashton, of Messrs. Kilburn & Co., as their representatives.

A meeting was held in the rooms of the Chamber on the 14th July, 1899, when, in addition to the above gentlemen, the following were also present :-Mr. G. V. Martyn, Consulting Engineer to Government of India for Railways, Mr. R. C. Dyson, Junior Consulting Engineer to the Government of India for Railways, Mr. J. Douglas, Agent of the East Indian Railway, Mr. W. A. Dring, General Traffic Manager of the East Indian Railway, Mr. T. R. Wynne, Agent of the Bengal Nagpur Railway, and Mr. A. E. P. Graves, Traffic Manager of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway. “

“The Consulting Engineer, however, stated that it might be taken as settled, that access to the coalfields would be afforded to the Bengal-Nagpur Railway, and the Chamber would have to decide whether the proposals of the Agent of the Bengal-

Nagpur Railway, as supported by the Indian Mining Association, would be accepted or, if not, what arrangements could be recommended in regard to the interests of trade generally.”

The Engineer narrated the strange tale of detour and shrine, explaining Mitchell that little room was available for deviation of line, as on the South the Damooda (Damodar) River defined the limit and on the North an area of soil useless from a permanent-way point of view likewise hemmed in the proposed route. The few yards' width of remaining ground offered him Hobson's Choice.

The unique geography of the land dictated the alignment and the work commenced. Gang of coolies, guided by their supervisors and contractors, were frantically laying the rail lines. Everything was going as per schedule until the iron way had progressed as far as the site of the present station of Talgaria.

“There a mysterious calamity' befell the toiling gangs. Coolies sickened from some uncanny, unknown malady whilst those who braved it a little longer bled from the nose and ears as they worked. Finally, even the remnants of the swarming navvies refused to lift a finger and the job stopped.”

Threats, bribes, promise, the universal motivational tools, which had served so well in past in furthering imperialistic mission, were of no avail. Here was something they could not understand and the frightened folk shrank away under the fear of the unknown. The contractors admitted their helplessness with their labour and left the baffled, harassed Engineer at his wits' end.

One morning, a wandering holy man came to his camp. He sought the sahib and informed him he was desecrating holy ground with his iron way which was doomed to disaster. “Sahib, you'll never put a line through that ground ahead. It is a suttee site and is sacred with the blood of many Hindu widows burnt there in the olden time.”

The Engineer knew of suttee, of course, that act of self-immolation practised voluntarily (and on occasions compulsorily) by Hindu women on the burning pyres of their dead husbands.

The Engineer had been too long in the country not to respect its many strange beliefs and off-times inexplicable happenings, or to pour the sceptical contempt of Western ignorance upon the mystic knowledge of the East.

He asked the old man's advice, unlearned and unlettered as he was, and what is more, he took it. He diverted his proposed line from the straight in a detour round the hallowed spot, resuming his alignment farther on. He fixed the site of the suttee pyres and walled it round to protect its sacred earth from the tread of alien feet and built his platform round it.

As soon as he detailed to the old fellow his proposals, things seemed to freshen and brighten up. The coolies quickly recovered their normal health & spirits and returned to their task with vigour.

The line took a leap to the right, past the fatal spot, then a leap back to the straight again creating a detour and encompassing a shrine.

The strange tale of Railways does not end at the shrine. After providing detour in the track alignment; the next task was to bridge the eastern bank of the Damooda River which now cut clean across the way.

The mighty Damooda river and its wide sandy bed was a formidable obstacle, a great engineering challenge, but not more so than many others that Railway Engineers had conquered all over India.

But the unknown awaited him, however hard would the Engineer try; he could not get a foundation for his centre pier. Shifting sand and unexpected out-of-season spate of floods mocked his fruitless endeavours.

Perplexed, out of wits, he sent for the local historian and the old man came again. He easily solved the riddle and with his usual simplicity outlined the cure.

“ Sahib, many holy men lie buried on the banks of this water. They resent your seeking to disturb their sleep.”

I appreciate all you say,” replied the builder of bridges, “but if I don’t span this river, I won’t get any sleep at all.”

“Sahib, if you are determined, you must propitiate the dead.”

“How ?” “Try again. You will find rock. Build up your masonry to water level; place a layer of silver on the pile, and build on. The bridge will stand and the holy ones sleep.”

Strange as it may sound, he complied with the old man’s extraordinary request. He found rock, built up to flood level, placed silver rupees edge to edge on the top of the masonry and carried on.

To-day the heavy freight trains rattle over the silver pier and their rumbling shakes not the pious ones who sleep in the sands below.

And, therein lies a strange tale buried in silver coins, sadly forgotten and even banished from folklores, where the twains of East and west had met once.

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