

Tracks of Empire and Memories of Loss: Migration, Displacement and Moral Testimony in the Age of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway

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Abstract

The expansion of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway (GIPR) in the nineteenth century is often described as a symbol of progress, connectivity and modernization under British rule. However, the narrative of technological achievement lies a deeper human history marked by migration, displacement, labour hardship and emotional suffering. This paper examines the social and moral consequences of railway expansion between 1850 and 1900, focusing on migration patterns, community disruption and the preservation of memory among affected populations. Using archival materials, secondary historical data, oral testimonies and literary narratives, the study reconstructs the lived experiences of displaced peasants, migrant labours and emerging railway communities. The research argues that the GIPR was not merely an economic instrument of empire but also a powerful force that reshaped identities and emotional landscapes. Railway construction led to land acquisition, forest clearance and labour recruitment that disturbed established social systems. These processes created new forms of mobility while also generating trauma and cultural fragmentation. The study further explores how collective memory and literature function as forms of moral testimony, preserving voices that colonial administrative records largely ignored.

By combining migration studies, memory theory and postcolonial historiography, this paper offers a human-centred reinterpretation of railway history. It demonstrates that the tracks of empire carried both commodities and human suffering, and that the memories of this transformation continue to shape regional identity. Recognizing these moral and emotional dimensions enriches our understanding of colonial infrastructure and its long-term social consequences.

Keywords: Great Indian Peninsular Railway (GIPR), colonial railways, displacement, memory, moral testimony, labour history

1. Introduction:

The nineteenth century was a period of major transformation in the Indian subcontinent. Among the most visible symbols of this transformation was the coming of the railway. The establishment of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway (GIPR) in 1849 and the opening of its first passenger line in 1853 between Bombay and Thane marked the beginning of a new era. Railways were presented by colonial authorities as instruments of progress, civilization and economic development. They were celebrated as achievements

of modern engineering and as signs of India's entry into the industrial age. However, behind this narrative of progress lies another history—one that speaks of migration, displacement, labour exploitation, cultural disruption and emotional suffering. The iron tracks that stretched across western and central India did not pass through empty land. They crossed villages, forests, grazing fields, rivers and sacred spaces. They entered regions inhabited by peasants, tribal communities, artisans and pastoral groups. The building of railways required land, timber, labour and administrative control. These requirements created deep social changes that are often overlooked in conventional railway histories. Most traditional studies of Indian railways focus on economic integration, commercial expansion and imperial strategy. Scholars have shown how railway networks connected cotton-producing regions to Bombay port, supported troop movement after the Revolt of 1857 and strengthened colonial administration. While these analyses are important, they primarily examine the railway from the perspective of the state and capital. The experiences of ordinary people—those who lost land, those who migrated for railway labour, those who lived in railway camps, and those who remembered these changes—are less visible in these accounts.

This paper seeks to shift the focus from steel and steam to people and memory. It argues that the history of the GIPR must be understood not only as a story of infrastructure but also as a story of human experience. Railway expansion created new forms of mobility while also causing forced displacement. It opened opportunities for wage labour but also exposed workers to dangerous conditions. It connected regions economically but fractured communities socially. These contradictions shaped the emotional and moral landscape of colonial modernity. Migration is a central theme in this paper. The railway itself enabled new forms of travel, but its construction also required massive labour recruitment. Men from drought-prone regions, tribal belts and impoverished villages moved to railway sites in search of work. Some migrated temporarily; others settled permanently near railway towns. This migration changed family structures, gender roles and social relations. At the same time, land acquisition for railway tracks displaced cultivators and reduced access to common resources. Thus, the railway both generated and required mobility. Displacement, however, was not only physical. It was also cultural and psychological. Land in rural India was more than economic property; it was tied to ancestry, ritual and identity. Losing land meant losing connection to memory and belonging. Migrant labourers experienced separation from family, unfamiliar working environments and strict industrial discipline. These experiences produced forms of trauma that were rarely documented in official colonial records.

Memory plays a crucial role in understanding this history. The absence of detailed archival records about labour suffering does not mean that such suffering did not occur. Instead, it means that these experiences must be sought in alternative sources—oral traditions, family stories, folk songs, and literary texts. Collective memory preserves emotional truth even when administrative archives remain silent. Through storytelling, communities pass down narratives of loss, resilience, and adaptation. These narratives function as moral testimony, reminding later generations of the costs of development.

Literature also serves as an ethical archive. Stories and poems that describe railway life capture feelings of loneliness, hope, fear, and endurance. They humanize large-scale processes like migration and industrialization. When read carefully, such texts reveal the moral complexity of colonial infrastructure. They show that modernization was not a simple or uniformly positive process. It involved negotiation, suffering, and transformation.

This paper therefore adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining railway history with migration studies and postcolonial analysis. By doing so, it aims to reconstruct a more balanced narrative—one that acknowledges economic change but also centers human voices. The GIPR is treated not only as a network

of tracks but as a lived space where empire met everyday life.

Ultimately, this study asks a simple but important question: What did the railway mean for those who built it, those who lost land to it and those who remember it today? By answering this question, this paper contributes to a broader rethinking of colonial infrastructure as both material system and moral landscape.

2. Literature Review:

The historiography of Indian railways has evolved significantly. Early studies focused primarily on economic and administrative dimensions. Daniel Thorner (1955) examined patterns of railway development in relation to colonial trade interests. Ian J. Kerr (2007) provided a comprehensive account of railway expansion and its institutional framework. These works demonstrate the strategic and commercial motivations behind railway investment.

More recent scholars have explored railways within broader colonial political economy. Mike Davis (2001) argued that railway networks contributed to market integration during famines, sometimes worsening food shortages by enabling grain export. Such studies reveal that infrastructure can have complex and contradictory effects.

Subaltern Studies scholars, particularly Ranajit Guha (1982), emphasized the need to recover marginalized voices from colonial archives. This perspective encourages historians to look beyond official documents and consider alternative sources of knowledge.

Memory studies, influenced by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), highlight how communities construct collective memory through social interaction. Memory is not passive recall but active reconstruction shaped by present needs. Applying this framework to railway history allows us to analyse how descendants remember migration and displacement.

Despite these contributions, relatively few studies combine railway history with memory and moral testimony. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by integrating migration history with cultural and emotional analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework:

This study draws on three theoretical traditions:

3.1 Migration Theory:

Migration is understood as both economic movement and social transformation. It includes seasonal labour mobility, permanent relocation and forced displacement.

3.2 Collective Memory:

Following Halbwachs (1992), memory is socially constructed. Communities preserve and reshape the past through storytelling and shared practices.

3.3 Moral Testimony:

Moral testimony refers to narratives that bear witness to suffering and injustice. Literature and oral history serve as ethical archives that challenge official silence.

Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional interpretation of railway expansion.

4. Methodology:

This study employs qualitative historical methods:

- Analysis of colonial railway reports and administrative records.
- Review of secondary historical literature.

- Collection of oral testimonies from families linked to early railway labour.
- Textual analysis of literary and folk narratives referencing railway life.

The research follows ethical guidelines in handling oral histories and aims to balance archival and narrative sources.

5. Migration and Displacement under the GIPR:

Railway construction required extensive land acquisition. Agricultural fields were divided by tracks. Forest lands were cleared for timber and alignment. Compensation mechanisms were uneven and often inadequate. In affected regions, peasants lost access to grazing land and irrigation systems. Some relocated within nearby villages; others migrated to towns. Railway expansion thus generated both displacement and opportunity.

Labour migration was central to GIPR operations. Thousands of workers were recruited for track laying, bridge construction and maintenance. Many came from economically vulnerable regions. Migration separated families, altered gender roles and created new settlement patterns around stations. Railway camps were temporary but intense social environments. Oral narratives describe overcrowding, disease outbreaks and dangerous working conditions. Mortality was common, though precise statistics are limited. Thus, migration under the GIPR was complex: it provided employment but also exposed workers to hardship.

6. Social Transformation and Identity:

Railway expansion reshaped social relations. Wage labour introduced new economic structures. Time discipline replaced agricultural rhythms. Hierarchical organization altered authority patterns. Railway colonies emerged as hybrid spaces. People from different castes, religions and regions interacted. This created new identities tied to railway employment.

Descendants of railway workers often express pride in their family connection to the railways. At the same time, memories of land loss remain sensitive topics in some villages.

Migration and displacement therefore produced fractured yet evolving identities.

7. Memory and Intergenerational Transmission:

Family stories preserve experiences of railway construction. Grandparents recount walking long distances for work, facing illness, or witnessing land acquisition.

These memories are selective but meaningful. They emphasize resilience and dignity alongside suffering. Memory becomes a moral lesson about endurance.

Collective memory also shapes regional identity. Railway heritage is celebrated in some towns, while in others it remains linked with grievance.

8. Literature as Moral Witness:

Literary and folk narratives capture emotional dimensions absent from official reports. Stories of migrant workers describe loneliness and hardship.

Literature humanizes statistics. It allows readers to feel the moral weight of displacement. Through narrative voice, railway labourers become subjects rather than objects of history.

Thus, literature functions as moral testimony, challenging celebratory accounts of colonial progress.

9. Discussion:

The findings suggest that railway expansion cannot be understood solely in economic terms. Migration transformed society. Displacement fractured communities. Memory preserved emotional truth.

Colonial infrastructure was both integrative and disruptive. It connected markets but separated families. It symbolized modernity but generated trauma.

Recognizing moral testimony enriches historical understanding. It calls for ethical engagement with the past.

10. Conclusion:

The history of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway cannot be reduced to statistics about mileage, revenue or engineering achievement. While these aspects are important for understanding economic development, they do not capture the full human impact of railway expansion. This study has attempted to move beyond institutional narratives and focus instead on migration, displacement and moral testimony. By doing so, it reveals a more complex and emotionally layered history of colonial infrastructure. Railway expansion in nineteenth-century India was a process of connection and separation at the same time. It connected markets, ports and administrative centers, helping to integrate India into global trade networks. Yet it also separated families, divided villages and disrupted long-standing social systems. Fields were cut by tracks. Forest communities lost access to resources. Migrant labourers left home in search of wages. Each of these movements carried emotional weight. Migration linked to the railway created new possibilities. Some individuals improved their economic position. Railway towns became centers of opportunity and social mobility. New skills were learned. New communities were formed. However, migration also involved insecurity, isolation and vulnerability. Workers in railway camps faced disease, harsh discipline and uncertain wages. Families experienced long periods of separation. Children grew up with memories shaped by absence and struggle.

Displacement, similarly, was not only a physical event but a moral experience. For many rural communities, land represented heritage and identity. Losing land meant losing more than income; it meant losing belonging. Such experiences left emotional traces that survived in collective memory. Even when official compensation was recorded in colonial documents, the emotional cost of uprooting remained undocumented.

The paper has also shown that memory and literature play essential roles in preserving this hidden history. Oral narratives passed down through generations serve as moral archives. They may not provide exact dates or statistics, but they capture feelings of injustice, endurance and adaptation. Literature transforms these experiences into shared cultural memory. Through stories and songs, communities remember both suffering and resilience.

Recognizing literature and oral tradition as moral testimony expands the scope of historical research. It challenges historians to listen carefully to voices outside official archives. It also reminds us that development projects, whether colonial or modern, must be evaluated not only in economic terms but also in human terms.

The GIPR symbolizes both empire and modernity. It was a tool of colonial power, enabling military control and commercial extraction. At the same time, it became part of the everyday life of Indians who worked on it, travelled by it and settled around it. Over time, the railway lost its purely colonial identity and became integrated into national life. Yet the memories of its early years—of labour, displacement and transformation—continue to echo in local histories. This paper suggests that writing infrastructure history

requires moral imagination. It requires acknowledging that steel tracks are laid on living landscapes. Progress often carries hidden costs. Migration may create opportunity but also emotional strain. Development may bring connectivity but also cultural loss. By bringing together migration analysis, memory studies and moral testimony, this paper offers a framework for understanding colonial railways as lived experience. It argues that the tracks of empire were also tracks of memory—paths along which stories of loss and resilience travelled across generations. In contemporary times, when large infrastructure projects continue to reshape societies, the lessons of nineteenth-century railway expansion remain relevant. Listening to stories from the tracks encourages more ethical reflection on development. It reminds policymakers and scholars alike that human dignity must remain central to modernization. The legacy of the GIPR, therefore, is not only visible in railway stations and bridges. It survives in family narratives, in regional identity, and in cultural memory. To honour this legacy, historians must continue to recover and preserve the voices of those whose lives were transformed by the coming of the railway. Only then can we fully understand the intertwined histories of empire, mobility, and memory.

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