 CHAPTER THREE

MOBILE INCARCERATION: TRAVELS IN COLONIAL STATE SPACE

Railways may do for India what dynasties have never done—what the genius of Ak- bar the Magnificent could not effect by government, nor the cruelty of Tippoo Saheb by violence; they may make India a nation.

— Edwin Arnold, The Marquis of Dalhousie’s Administration of British India, 1865

Traveling by the Rail very much resembles migrating in one vast colony, or setting out together in a whole moving town or caravan. Nothing under this enormous load is ever tagged to the back of a locomotive, and yet we were no sooner in motion than Calcutta, and the Hooghly, and Howrah, all began to recede away like the scenes in a Dissolving View. The first sight of the steamer no less amazed than alarmed the Burmese, who had a tradition that the capital of their empire would be safe, until a vessel should advance up the Irrawady without oars and sails! Similarly does the Hindoo look upon the Railways as a marvel and miracle—a novel incarnation for the regeneration of Bharat-versh.

— Bholanauth Chunder, Travels of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India, 1869

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that railways came closest of any state work to distilling and communicating the ideology of colonial state space. The late-nineteenth-century colonial imagination figured railways as the universal vehicle for its self-proclaimed program of “moral and material progress.” The rhetorical excess that marked official discourse on railways serviced the ideological encoding of India as colonial state space. Although railways were overdetermined symbols of modernity and economic exploitation in colonial and nationalist discourse, respectively, they have not occasioned extensive study in the literature on late colonial India. This gap between the rhetorical inflation and the historiographical under-development of railways is a consequence, in part, of the highly particular
and particularizing optic through which the railway question has long been viewed. The postcolonial scholarship on railways has almost exclusively focused on the economic impact of railways. This organizing focus owes its origins to the long shadow cast by the nationalist thesis of the deindustrialization and denationalization of the economy within which railways acted as chief agents of colonial economic exploitation. Railways figured centrally in the emergent nationalist imagination, especially the economic critique of colonial capitalism that crystallized in the 1870s and 1880s. Nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadev Ranade, and Romesh Dutt reversed the logic of colonial discourse that presented railways as a universal magical agency for development by recasting them as particular vehicles for intensified imperial exploitation. Railways had, in their view, directly serviced the British imperial economy and impeded the formation of a coherent, autonomous, and homogenous national economy.

The postcolonial scholarship on railways has largely focused on such questions as the impact of railways on peasant rationality, the reordering of trade routes, the de-segmentation of markets, interregional price differentials in agricultural commodities, the dynamics of economic imperialism, and the economic impact of railways on specific regional economies. Although this literature has yielded insights, it has been highly particularizing, oriented to the details of one particular sector, region, or community. The near absolute focus, with some notable exceptions, on the economic consequences of railways has obscured from view their wider political and social significance.

Chapter 1 placed railways (and other “state works”) within a broader investigation of the transformation of colonial state power and the relationship between state and space. Here I chart the complex itinerary of railways as metonyms of a colonial modernizing project, as mediums for the reconfiguration of social space, and as producers of a hierarchical, fragmented, and contradictory topography of social encounter and exclusion. As a privileged vector of colonial state space, railways not only enabled the massive and unprecedented circulation of peoples and commodities within the boundaries of colonial India. They were also key sites for the institution of the colonial political economy of difference, the refashioning of everyday experiences and collective self-understandings, and the shaping of a range of categories of practice.

My general argument is that railways, which were paradigmatic state works, materialized at the everyday level the tension between the simultaneous homogenization and differentiation of social relations. To make this case, I explore the dynamic interplay between official discourses on rail-
ways, colonial policies toward railway workers, and the everyday experience of railway travel. Although official discourse presented railways as the bearers of even development, an abstract space of exchange and circulation, and modern subjects rid of particularistic attachments, colonial practices continually produced the very particularities and forms of unevenness they proclaimed to transcend. The tension between the homogenizing and particularizing orientation of colonial practices fashioned the lived experience of colonial space.

A MAGICAL AGENCY: RAILWAYS IN THE COLONIAL IMAGINATION

Within official discourse, railways were conceived as a magical agency that would promote and secure the material welfare of the people, tame entrenched prejudices, and enable the production of an industrious and disciplined social body. The following account, written by George Macgeorge, the chief consulting engineer for railways, is exemplary:

A land where the very names of innovation, progress, energy and the practical arts of life were unknown, or were abhorred, and which appeared sunk in a lethargic sleep... under the guiding direction of Providence it is from the British nation that the vast continent of India has received the leaven of a new moral and material regeneration, which can now never cease to operate until it has raised the country to a high level of power and civilization. The most potent factor in this truly wonderful resurrection of a whole people, so visibly taking place before the eyes of the present generation, is unquestionably the railway system of the country; and there is little reason to doubt that the powerful onward impetus already imparted by railway communication... will continue to prevail... and will ever remain as a lasting memorial of the influence of Great Britain on the destinies of India.3

According to this account, the “mighty agency of steam” had brought methodical, step-by-step enlightenment to the uncivilized, disciplined the “usually lethargic Eastern,” and taught the “virtue of punctuality under the uncompromising tuition of the locomotive whistle” (220). It was widely claimed that railway space-time had at once uplifted and contained colonial subjects.

In the colonial context, however, the orderly progression of such narratives required the continual orchestration and staging of a fetishized differ-
ence. A key focus of the official discourse on railways was the imagined encounter between two reified social forms: the social morphology of caste and civilizing technology. It was widely held that under the impact of railways, deep forms of social regimentation would simply wither away. As Macgeorge observed:

The strong barriers of one of the most rigid and exclusive caste systems in the world have been penetrated on every side by the power of steam. In India for many years past, caste prejudices have been practically extinguished within the fences of a line of railway, and the most sacred Brahmin will now contentedly ignore them rather than forego the luxury and economy of a journey by rail. (230)

As pedagogical and disciplinary nodes of colonial governance, railways were figured as the progenitors of an abstract, homogenous space of production and circulation, and as the incubators of modern subjects liberated from entrenched prejudices and customs. In an influential work, Edward Davidson, a central figure in the Public Works Department, claimed a determinate temporal coincidence between improvements in locomotion and “moral” progress. Reiterating the almost obligatory juxtaposition between a reified understanding of both caste and civilizing technology, he observed that

a sacred Brahmin now sits in a third class carriage in contact with a Dome (the lowest caste, employed in burying the dead), and . . . preferring a saving to his caste exclusiveness, drops his prejudices. . . . I saw an instance of this one day at a station on the East India Railway. The horror of the high caste Baboo when, entering the carriage, he saw the sweeper, and yet perceived, from a hasty exclamation of the guard, that he had the alternative of sitting with a Dome, or of being left behind, was most evident. He however went. . . . And while locomotion has thus improved, India has passed from prevailing sutteeism, gross ignorance and torpor, to a remarkable degree of civilization, intellectual advancement, and activity.4

Railways were understood, then, as potent caste-dissolving forces that would progressively attenuate the “pathology of difference” that constituted the indigenous social body.5 Such narratives and their rhetorical excess were crucial components of the attempted legitimization of colonial rule. For it was one of the grand clichés of nineteenth-century Orientalism that
South Asia was a vast, vegetative space, a timeless space of ceaseless reiteration. History began, in this account, with British colonial rule.

The narrativization of state works as agencies of uniform progress also spoke volubly of attempts to normalize, domesticate, and efface the unevenness engendered by colonial policies. Consider, in this regard, Bipin Pal’s (a radical swadeshi nationalist) recollection of his first journey on the recently inaugurated steam-powered ship from Sylhet to Narayanganj (Bengal) in the early 1870s:

The people of the villages on the banks of the river along its route had not as yet become sufficiently familiar with it to treat the sight of these huge things, moving on the water without human hands, with indifference. As soon as we passed close to a village, the whole population . . . came out in full force to the river-side, and literally rendered puja or worship to the boat. The women cried out ulu, ulu, the cry, which is made by them on all auspicious occasions, and prostrated themselves devoutly on the ground, taking the apparently self-moving boat to be some manifestation of the Deity. Sometimes they would bring flowers and vermilion and other materials of worship and throw these in the direction of the boat to the immense amusement of the European captain and his crew.6

Pal’s narrative bears no trace of the objectifying logic of official discourses on “native” responses to technology nor does it make grand teleological claims on behalf of state works. His attempt to render intelligible the subaltern responses to novel technologies suggests more than the familiar workings of colonial middle-class habitus primed to render the unfamiliar familiar for both a British colonial audience and colonized elites. It gives expression rather to the lived unevenness of colonial space, the everyday visual spectacles it afforded, and the particular burden assumed by middle-class colonial subjects in rendering visible the complexity of colonial space-time.

It is important to note here that official narratives on the universalizing force of railways only gathered force from the late 1860s onward. Locked within the terms of a colonial sociology of knowledge that rendered the social body as an immutable assemblage of agonistic interests and groups, railway authorities had initially rejected the possibility of passenger traffic. Promoters of railways and railway officials assumed that within the boundaries of colonial India, the circulation of commodities, not people, would constitute the principal source of revenue because the supposed “prejudice, timid-
ity, and stationary character of natives” would deter them from travel. It was pervasively taken for granted that the “remuneration for railroads within India would be drawn from the conveyance of merchandise, and not from passengers.” Official discourse in this period envisioned colonial subjects as producers of raw materials, as consumers of British manufactured products, as unskilled laborers in state works, and as potentially disciplined loyal subjects but not quite as mobile passengers.

The exponential and sustained growth in passenger revenues challenged the vision of stationary masses fixed in villages and rendered immobile by religious prohibitions. More than 96 percent of Indian passengers traveled third class, and the bulk of passenger revenues derived from third- and fourth-class fares. The number of annual passengers rose from 80 million in 1880 to 200 million in 1904, and to more than 500 million by 1920–21. During the last quarter of the century, the number of passengers equaled that of France, and the passenger–miles ratio (the number of miles traveled per passenger) was higher than that of continental Europe. Until the early 1870s, railway travel in Britain was largely restricted to the middle and upper classes, and the proportion of third-class travelers (which ranged over time from 17.5 to 59 percent) was higher in the north than in the south. It was not until 1911 that third-class travelers accounted for 96 percent of the total passengers carried by the various railway companies in Britain. In colonial India, the predominance of third-class passengers across regional divides was an early and enduring element of railway space.

Official reports from the early 1860s expressed astonishment at the rapid increase in railway travel and the enthusiasm generated by the opening of railway lines and stations. The following report describes the “unexpected” scene at the opening of the East India Railway line at Delhi in 1865:

The native population of Delhi poured to the event in a remarkable and unexpected manner . . . the people of the city had of their own accord applied to the local authorities for permission to pass over the bridge of boats on the Jumna free of toll, in order to see the opening of the EIR and had made it a holiday. Looking from the railway platform on the top of the high embankment . . . I saw at one time a continuous stream of natives emerging from the fort of Selimgurh on the other side of the Jumna, passing over the bridge of boats and extending past the Railways station along the railway embankment and the grand trunk road parallel to it for about two miles down the line. The crowd at the railway station and along the two platforms was great. There were men of all classes there . . . and the general excitement among them rendered
this unusual scene animated and gay. . . The spontaneous manifestation of the people is very gratifying . . . and all the more striking as being wholly unexpected, and is a good sign of railways finding favor among the people of the country.10

In a related account, John Brunton, the resident engineer of the Scinde Railway, observed:

It was at first thought that it would be difficult to get natives to travel together in the same carriages on account of caste prejudices, but this proved a delusion. An hour before the time of a train starting, vast crowds of natives surrounded the booking offices clamoring for tickets, and at first there was no keeping them to the inside of the carriages. They clambered up on the roofs of the carriages and I have been obliged to get up on the roofs and whip them off.11

Official surprise at the unexpected presence of passenger traffic within the abstract space of production and circulation envisioned for railways was matched by increasing anxiety about policing and disciplining these “vast crowds.” Railways not only enabled the circulation of vast numbers of passengers but also became a key locus for new forms of colonial domination, political anxiety, and social struggle.

THE HOMOGENIZATION AND DIFFERENTIATION OF LABOR

Speaking at the opening of the Bhore Ghat incline in 1862, Bartle Frere, the governor of the Bombay Presidency, articulated official interpretations of railways as securing a unitary space-time in colonial India.

I can safely say that . . . before the commencement of what I may call the Railway Period . . . not only were the wages in most parts of the country fixed by usage and authority, rather than by the natural laws of supply and demand, but the privilege of labour was in general restricted to particular spots . . . for the first time in history the Indian coolie finds that he has in his power of labour a valuable possession which, if he uses it right, will give to him and to his family something much better than mere subsistence. . . . Follow him to his own home, in some remote Dec- can or Concan village, and you will find that the railway labourer has carried to his own village not only new modes of working, new wants, and a new feeling of self-respect and independence, but new ideas of
what government and laws intend to secure to him; and he is, I believe, a better and more loyal subject, as he is certainly a more useful labourer.12

The narrative rendering of railways as the carriers of a uniform modernity that would spawn universal economic subjects, generalize instrumental rationality, and install the apparently natural harmonies of the laws of “supply and demand” expressed the modernizing ideology that shaped the making of a distinctive colonial state space. The implicit identification of capitalism with homogeneity repressed the on-going production of difference and unevenness that was the very condition of the expansion of capitalism and the reproduction of colonial rule. Such official claims about the universalizing powers of railways were concurrent with the differentiation and fragmentation of the labor force employed in state works.

The production of a massive network of state works necessitated a massive labor force. Most of the labor force was drawn from landless peasants who were the unacknowledged product of colonial spatial-economic restructuring. The labor employed in the construction and operation of railways was actively recruited, organized, and divided in accordance with colonial classificatory frameworks. Official records of railway construction attest to the way popular colonial and state epistemologies framed the differential placement of workers at work sites by various agents—contractors, engineers, jobbers, and the like. Chief engineer of the Scinde Railway John Brunton’s ethnographic register of laborers at a construction site illustrates the everydayness of such categorizations:

The Scindee . . . is naturally indolent and devoid of muscular power; at the same time he is not deficient in talent, easily acquiring a knowledge of account-keeping and writing. The natives of the neighbouring state of Cutch are a much superior race. Cutch sends carpenters, masons, smiths, and skilled handicraftsmen. . . . From the hill tribes of Beluchistan and Afghanistan [sic] were obtained a hardy race of labourers; men of great stature and personal strength, but wholly ignorant of the use of other tools than the powrab [hoe] and a basket in which to carry loosened earth.13

The hierarchy of unskilled versus skilled labor-power was overdetermined, in colonial India, by the language of caste distinctions: “For operations requiring physical force, the low-caste natives who eat flesh and drink spirits, are the best; but for all the better kinds of workmanship, masonry, brick-
laying, carpentry, for instance, the higher castes surpass them.”14 A specifically “colonial sociology of knowledge” thus directed the classification of specific subaltern communities as paradigmatic railway construction workers.

In a recent history of railway contract management in colonial India, Ian Kerr notes the ubiquitous presence throughout work sites of the so-called tribe of Wudders or Uddars.15 Following the classificatory logic of the colonial archive itself, he describes the shifting use of the term in order to show that speculations aside, what is known is that Wudders were... an important component of the railway construction workforce throughout south, central and western India... [They] were a significant component of...the navies of India... who migrated over long distances to work-sites, who moved earth more effectively than any other group and who helped to free the railway companies from labour obtained from village populations whose presence at work-sites at certain times of the year could not be counted on. (110)

I want to suggest here that the transformations in the categorical fortunes of this specific group illustrate a broader process of the simultaneous homogenization and differentiation of the colonial body politic. Early census classifications and official records classified this group as an “aboriginal tribe” engaged in various forms of earthwork, including constructing tank-bunds, sinking wells and the like, and identified their regional provenance as the Deccan, especially Tamil-, Telegu-, and Kannada-speaking areas (105). By the late 1860s, however, the distinguishing feature of this so-called tribe, as recorded in official documents, was their employment in the construction of state works. Census and railway labor records classified them as “professional navies,” “the most useful and efficient class of labourers in public works who have a hereditary aptitude for such work,” and “who always work on contract” (110). The displacement of subaltern groups from the localized agrarian landscapes in which they had previously been embedded was registered in official accounts as unchanging, hereditary characteristics. In fact, the term Wudder, which had initially signified a specific regional community, came to refer generically to circulating labor employed as excavators on state works. Diverse and territorially specific subaltern groups (e.g., Nuniyas or Luniyas) from the United Provinces, Bengal, Bombay Presidency, and so forth, were subsumed under the putative all-India category of Wudders, and defined as groups with an appar-
ently hereditary calling for employment in state works. The shifting representational fortunes of the category Wudder reveals the intimate interlock between the de-historicizing operations of colonial classifications and the production of difference that reached a critical conjuncture in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The extension of the railway system was crucial to the formation of a transregional labor market and a mobile labor force. However, it did not imply the creation of a unified and homogenous labor force. Railway labor in both state-owned and privately run enterprises was organized and divided into discrete, bounded groups of “European, Eurasian, West Indian of Negro descent pure or mixed, non-Indian Asiatic or Indian.”\textsuperscript{16} Such abstractions were rendered socially effective by requiring workers to provide medical certification and documentary proof of their racial and caste identities because these determined the very condition of work for remuneration, location within the railway hierarchy, promotions, leave, education, and housing. The proliferation of distinctions based on caste, race, lineage, and region of origin represented at once the state’s monopoly on forms of symbolic violence and its apparently paradoxical investment in particularistic attachments.

The colonial political economy of difference directed the absolute closure of upper-level positions (not merely engineering and managerial positions) in the railway bureaucracy to “Indians” and the privileging of resident Europeans and Eurasians (or Anglo-Indians) in the railway hierarchy from 1870 until 1930. In 1923, the railways employed approximately half of the Anglo-Indian community, and until the early 1930s, Europeans and Anglo-Indians occupied all of the upper-level positions on state-managed railways.\textsuperscript{17} The absolute closure of upper-level positions in railways from “Indians” was justified on the basis of their supposed constitutional inadequacies. The exclusive demarcation of such posts as engine drivers, guards, stationmasters, and shunters to either Europeans or Eurasians—despite the higher costs of imported labor in the case of the former and inflated pay scales in the case of latter—exemplifies how colonial practices created and helped sustain an isomorphism between particular skills and communities. Edward Davidson, a chief architect of railway policies in the 1860s and 1870s, provided an authoritative justification of the near absolute exclusion of “natives” as engine drivers and shunters. He observed:

\begin{quote}
The natives of India cannot be depended on for any occupation in which punctuality, forethought, and presence of mind are eminently needed. While numbers of them have been employed as engine fitters,
cleaners, and stokers, they have not been found fit to be trusted as drivers. . . . Natives are wanting in presence of mind, courage to deal with emergencies, forethought and caution which a good driver of engines must have before he can be competent to manage and engine the train. But on the other hand, natives of India have a fineness of touch and quickness of apprehension, which soon enables them to handle lathes or any steam driven machinery, and to acquire the skill needed to manage a steam engine or drive a locomotive; but they are wanting the nerve, the punctuality, and constant attention to cleanliness, which even this charge requires.¹⁸

Colonial stereotyping had a self-referential quality. Davidson’s simultaneous acknowledgment and disavowal of the possibility of “Indian” drivers exemplify the co-production of the colonial sociology of knowledge and labor practices. The gesture toward the potential employability of “natives”—their apparent “fineness of touch and quickness of apprehension” itself based on colonial stereotypes—was quickly disavowed in the repetition of the codified regime of deficits seen as intrinsic to colonized bodies. The few “Indians” who were trained as engine drivers and shunters in the late 1870s were restricted to low-speed goods trains and level branch lines, for they were deemed incapable of safely conveying passenger traffic.

A comprehensive report on railway administration from the early 1880s reiterated the fiction of natural competencies. In a section titled “Employment of Natives as Engine Drivers and Shunters,” the report acknowledged that the handful of Indians employed in such positions had performed “impressively,” but they were characterized as “exceptional” cases. Instead, the standardized objections to the employment of “native” drivers were reproduced: “deficiency in intelligence, want of judgment, want of promptitude in case of emergencies, low physical power, deficiency in stamina and presence of mind.” This list was supplemented with such apparently intrinsic failings as “want of sufficient technical knowledge to adjust the mechanism of an engine.”¹⁹ According to this logic, because “natives” were constitutionally unable to transcend caste as well as physical and mental deficiencies, any training or education would be necessarily wasted.

The privilege accorded to Europeans and Anglo-Indians (an emergent category during this period) was part of an anxious attempt to maintain the reified binarism between colonizer and colonized, European and native. Anglo-Indians inhabited a liminal space within the racialized colonial (and subsequently national) social landscape. This liminality threatened to disrupt, yet in effect reinforced, the continual staging of the reified binarisms
constitutive of colonial racialization.\textsuperscript{20} It was therefore imperative to contain their potentially transgressive circulation and make them fit within the binary structure of the colonial political economy of race. The report observed that direct state assistance to this group as a whole, and to indigent children in particular, who were “either orphans, deserted by their fathers, or illegitimate, or the children of men out of work,” was “absolutely necessary.” Failure to provide for their employment in railways would have been a “lamentable and glaring reproach on the character of government.” It was argued that an Anglo-Indian

[c]ould not support himself in this country by working as a day-labourer, or by adopting the avocation of a native peasant. An uneducated Eurasian almost necessarily becomes idle and profitless, and a dangerous member of the community. . . . It must be remembered that he (or his English ancestor) was brought out to India originally to do work that could only be done by a European . . . a fact, which in itself gives him claim to careful consideration.\textsuperscript{21}

Not only did state practices continually generate shifting sociologies of knowledge, but state-generated classificatory schemes were institutionalized in a range of quotidian policies. These included the caste-based recruitment of construction workers, the privilege accorded to Europeans and Anglo-Indians in upper-level and middle-level positions, the classification of locals “from Bengal” as the most “adequate station masters,” and the proliferation of particularizing discourses about the suitability of Sikhs, Parsees, Madrasis, and the like for specific lower-level positions.\textsuperscript{22} Although official discourses presented railways as potent universalizing and civilizing forces, colonial labor policies reaffied the salience of identities based on caste, race, and religion.

Colonial policies generated intense debate. The numerous petitions sent to the railway department and the proliferation of newspaper articles demanding greater “native” employment in railways illustrate the ways in which the increasingly apparent contradictions of colonial practices became the template for new claims and demands. An article published in 1871 in the United Provinces, in the prominent Hindi newspaper \textit{Sadadarsha}, articulated the constitutive hierarchies that characterized the organization and experience of state space. Its immediate context was the declaration by the state-owned East India Railway that it intended to hire more “natives” as engine drivers and shunters. It observed that
The EIR has earned the thanks of the unprejudiced portion of the community by introducing a bold measure of economy. We cannot sufficiently admire the courage it has shown in its stated decision to hire native drivers and guards. It is not at all surprising, however, that its actions in this manner were condemned with one unanimous voice by the European press. They have all come forward to repeat without hesitation that natives lack the moral qualities which are so essential to railway drivers and guards—that their employment will increase the dangers of railway travelling; and that the proposed system is a piece of false economy. . . . For some time to come, the European press, with that remarkable love for impartiality and fair play which distinguishes them in this country, will be only too ready to attribute every accident which may happen to native negligence and want of pluck. A native guard was lately convicted of being asleep in the train, and the case is held up as a typical one, as if no European guard has ever been convicted of a similar offence. An unfortunate accident took place the other day at Vidaywati near Serampore, and European journalists, without waiting for particulars, at once jumped to the conclusion that it was attributable to the stupid system of employing native drivers and guards. Can race antagonism and race prejudice go further?25

The inclusion of greater numbers of “Indians” as engine drivers, shunters, stationmasters, and engineers in public works in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a product as much of economic considerations (e.g., the greater expense of imported English labor) as of the force of collective protest. From the 1890s onward, the Indian National congress maintained a sustained campaign demanding greater “Indian” employment in state works. More dramatically, the foundation of the first trade union in 1897 and a series of strikes by Indian rail workers in 1906, 1908, 1909, 1917–18, and 1921–22 undermined the economic and military network of railways and forced the state to revise race-based privileges and pay scales. However, the middle and upper echelons of the vast railway bureaucracy remained closed to “Indians” until the late 1930s.24 The formation of an increasingly homogenous and uniform communication and transaction space was coeval with the intensification of various forms of exclusion and differentiation. The contradictory character of colonial practices, together with the force of official representations of railways as the very motor of modernity, also spurred critical understandings of colonial domination.

Colonial practices of spatial-economic restructuring did not establish an
interchangeable, freely circulating labor force liberated from the nightmarish burdens of a deadening tradition. Rather it produced a hierarchically organized, fragmented labor force wherein both skilled and unskilled workers were differentiated along the very particularistic lines that the magical agency of railways was supposed to overcome. Although local social groups were increasingly incorporated as a mobile labor force into the universalized social relations entailed in commodified wage labor, they were actively marked as particularized bodies differentiated by race, caste, religion, lineage, and region of origin. The antinomy between practices of homogenization and differentiation was not an aberration of the natural laws of political economy as envisioned by classical political economists. It was rather an everyday expression of the doubled and uneven character of colonial space-time.

MOBILE INCARCERATION

The microspatial elements and practices that defined railway travel illustrate how millions of passengers shared a formally similar structure of experience of mobile incarceration wherein the internal divisions and distinctions within communities were rendered less salient than that between colonizer and colonized, European and native. The spatial organization of railway travel along particularized lines at once homogenized and bound colonial subjects within the hierarchical and fragmented grid of state space. Yet the everyday experience of state space, as forged along the railway lines, spurred the articulation of new forms of social struggle and collective self-understandings.

The internal hierarchies that structured colonial relations were etched into the spatial ordering of railway stations, platforms, and the interior of rail carriages. Railway stations were located with reference to the classic spatialized racial grid that prevailed throughout the towns and urban centers of colonial India. Colonial racial ideologies were inscribed in the formation of separate spaces for European (civil lines, military cantonments, and railway colonies) and “native” residents. In accord with this spatial ordering, railway stations were located near civilian and military areas, away from the “diseased and malarious native quarters.” 25 The placement of railway stations along this grid was driven as much by military as sanitary concerns. It was argued that “railway stations should be located at a convenient distance from cantonments of European troops, and should not be placed too close to native areas.” This was considered necessary to ensure the status of stations as “places of security and a last resort for troops.” Moreover,
it would serve as a protective “health measure for European residents and travelers” (August 1859, 7).

The constitution of a “proper” sanitary and military distance between railway stations and native quarters was expressed in the “clear space” that surrounded railway stations. Both legislative fiat and overt force effected these measures. The Public Works Department was authorized, for instance, to “undertake the summary removal of all houses and building” if native quarters were considered perilously close to station yards and grounds (July 1865, 39–40). Such practices were generalized throughout colonial India. In 1859, colonial railway authorities enshrined the principle of defensibility as the template for the architectural form of railway stations. Although the first railway stations such as the one at Lahore were built as formidable fortresses, in later decades the degree and extent of fortifications at railway stations hinged on perceived local particularities. In the United Provinces, for instance, which was the major site for the rebellion of 1857–58, stations were built in accordance with the strictest military standards of defensibility. Consequently, the railway station in Kanpur, a key locus of the 1857–58 rebellion and deemed awash still in “revolutionary tendencies,” had higher enclosures, a greater number of flanking towers, and deeper and higher ditch fences (May 1865, 6–8). Although the architectural form of railway stations varied—from Norman to the neo-Gothic domed clock towers, cathedral-like arches, soaring spires, and stone animals springing from the walls like gargoyles in the Victoria Station in Bombay—the internal spaces of platforms and waiting sheds were ordered in a regularized fashion throughout colonial India. There was a deliberate attempt, through various means, to regulate and contain the movement of what were seen as unruly, disease-ridden bodies and to minimize the possibility of encounters between them and European passengers.

A look at the microgeography of railway travel illustrates the structuring of colonial space by the hierarchical and entwined economies of race, class, gender, and religion. The attempt to regulate the movement of colonial subjects was variously concretized. A number of regulations were put into place from the 1860s onward in response to the perceived dangerous transformation of railway stations into “spaces of gossip and general assembly for natives.” A key target of the various attempts to police the mobility of bodies concerned the proliferation of “native idlers” who had made “it a practice of coming down to meet the trains for the purpose of inspecting the passengers, meeting their friends, and having a gossip” (August 1865, 39). Not only was entry into railway stations regulated through a system of special passes, but third-class passengers were only allowed into railway stations
forty-five minutes before the distribution of tickets. They were then “marshaled” into third-class coaches (less than 4 percent of “Indians” traveled second class) by the ubiquitous railway police. Such practices “would ensure that the platform will be left clear for the service of first and second class passengers.” Railway platforms in colonial India, unlike those in Britain during this period, were owned by the state yet seen as the private property of the railways. Consequently, there were strict legal prohibitions against trespassing on station platforms. Until allowed entry into the station, third-class passengers were sequestered in “waiting sheds” marked in vernacular languages and English and located outside the railway stations (October 3, 1859, 65). These provided a striking contrast to the “Gentleman waiting rooms” that were located within railway stations. Ironically, many of the “native waiting sheds” at principal stations were located in close proximity to the railway compounds set up for European railway employees. These presented a striking and visible contrast. The surrounding railway compounds for European and Eurasian railway employees, privileged subjects of colonial state space, were constructed in accord with the standardized regulations for state buildings. The railway compound was provided with a “vegetable garden adequate to the wants of its European residents, with well raised tanks, edged with trees, and furnished with benches . . . well kept cricket and rifle grounds, alleys for bowls, skittles, and quoits, . . . a well constructed library and coffee room in a raised situation, with benches for smokers in the verandahs and on the roof” (July 1865, 24).

The racialized parcelization of railway space materialized the hierarchical ordering of subjecthood in relation to colonial state space. The production of differentiated spaces and subjects was expressed in the separate “privy and urinal accommodations” constructed for Europeans and “Indians” at railway stations. Such accommodations for the latter were placed “outside the main building of the station, but which communicated with the platform by a covered passage” (July 1869, 8–10). Moreover, third-class carriages did not contain lavatories until sustained agitation during the 1870s when such facilities were provided on some lines, yet many railway lines continued to have no such station facilities until the late 1930s. As one official report from the United Provinces observed, “it was not desirable to give the water closet accommodations called for [the reference is to numerous petitions and protests] considering the dirty, careless habits of even the most respectable natives.” And, not surprisingly, the usual suspects of “native caste and religious prejudices” were summoned to justify the absence of refreshment rooms on third-class carriages and trains.26
The hierarchy and differentiation of colonial state space reached an absurd level in the proliferating forms of rolling stock. There were, for instance, discrete, enclosed carriages classified as first-class European, second-class European and Eurasian, third-class Indian (reclassified in 1885 as inter class), and fourth or so-called coolie class (introduced in 1874). The obsessive concern to calibrate the movements of differentiated bodies, and reproduce the reified binarism of colonizer and colonized, underlay the endurance of these multiple divisions, despite the fact that railway companies only made profits on third- and fourth-class traffic. The attempt to contain the accelerated circulation engendered by railways fashioned even the internal partitions of third-class carriages. These were organized spatially to enable quick and efficient counts of “Indian” passengers. Despite the greater numbers of third-class passengers in relation to first-, second-, and inter-class travelers, third-class carriages were remarkably compressed spaces. It was argued, in this regard, that “a native does not want cubic, but superficial space whereupon to dispose his bundle, his brass pots, and other property” (August 1865, 12). In fact, third-class carriages did not contain any seats until 1885, following sustained agitation and protests by nationalist organizations, at which point the third class was renamed inter class and the fourth reclassified as third. In Britain, third- and fourth-class passengers traveled in open boxcars until the passage of the Gladstone Act in 1844. In colonial India, until the early 1870s, mobility within the train was effectively circumscribed, because the doors of third-class coaches were kept locked for the duration of the journey. As a result, passengers had to struggle to get the attention of railway police guards in order to signal stops.

Unlike the multiple divisions generalized across state space in colonial India, the category class in British railway space—first employed on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1830 and codified in 1844 with Gladstone’s Railway Regulation Act—represented the central vector of differentiation (110). What is more, the provision of separate entrances, booking stations, and waiting rooms along class lines at British railway stations was restricted to particular railway companies; it was not a generalized feature of railway space (111). In contrast, colonial railway space was marked by a remarkable coherence between microspatial elements (coaches, division of platforms, waiting sheds) and macroconstructions (location and placement of railway stations, the classic racial grid of urban spaces, the ideological form of state space). These various practices and spaces were expressive of, and embedded within, the hierarchically structured field of colonial social relations. Colonial practices at once differentiated between putative racial
types and classes and placed Indian bodies into the homogenized category of third- and fourth-class passengers. By creating and policing discrete boundaries between the raced and classed subjects of colonial state space, such practices tended toward the flattening of the internal divisions within “communities.”

The generalization of the intricate microgeography of railway travel was increasingly translated into sharp political commentaries that took as their central focus the internal divisions of state space. Exemplary of such protests was a petition authored by the recently established British-Indian Association of the United Provinces (established by local elites) and signed by 3,251 people. This petition was sent in 1867 to the governor-general with suggestions for the reform of “existing railway arrangements.” It began by locating itself within the official script on railways: “we approach your majesty with the liveliest appreciation of the numerous material and moral benefits conferred on the country by the introduction and progress of railways, and with the deepest gratitude to those great and good men to whom we are indebted for it.” It abruptly shifted, however, to a more contentious register. It observed: “the government is fully aware that railway traveling in regard to natives has for a long time been full of the most bitter and serious grievances . . . the entire number of poor, native passengers are groaning and suffering from what cannot but be termed as a dire evil and slavery. . . . the miseries suffered equal the horrors of the ‘middle passage.’”

The petition made clear that these “grievances” did not refer to railways as such, that is, they were not a function of the encounter between the novelty of railways and supposed native prejudice. Instead, it stressed that the “dire evil and slavery” was “not inherent to railways” but contingent on “particular railway arrangements,” and hence “open to reform.” Building on this claim, it urged the state to consider the proposed reforms in the system of “public works” as not only an “act of State Charity” but also “a case of simple justice.”

Among the “points of issue” raised by the petition were the inadequacies of the “open and unsheltered waiting sheds,” where “crowds of hundred [have to wait], for several hours at a time, before they can purchase tickets.” The petition stressed the privileged accommodations provided for the “very few wealthy” Europeans, who had recourse to enclosed waiting rooms within the station. In contrast, the “vast masses of the poor, weak, sick, infirm and feeble have practically no shelter at all” (4). The petition claimed that the differentiations made between various groups were exacerbated by the gaps between the linearity of railway space-time and the competing times that marked the every day of the “masses”:
It cannot be expected from them that they come in only at the proper time. Most of them have only an indefinite idea of time, knowing little beyond *purhurs* of three hours each. A large number, too, come in from surrounding villages and rural districts where no time is kept. . . . Still more, over and above and beyond all, trains with third-class coaches arrive habitually irregularly and behind the time, that even without any fault of the passengers . . . they are compelled to wait for long hours. (4)

The petition suggests how emergent middle-class engagements with the colonial state grounded their legitimacy on both an assertion of difference (differing conceptions of time) and the reproach of an incomplete universality (the delays specific to trains with third- and fourth-class carriages, for first- and second-class coaches alone were run through in long-distance trains).

It also expressed the competitive, if unequal, struggle between an increasingly assertive colonial middle class and state agencies over the self-assigned task of representing subaltern communities. In this regard, both local middle classes and the colonial state constructed subaltern communities (the “masses”) as the legitimating ground for competing articulations and assertions of sociopolitical power. Yet the task of representing subaltern communities carried internal ideological limits. For a key “point of issue” was the ways colonial practices tended to homogenize not only “peculiar feelings and customs” but differential locations in “rank and social scale”:

We would beg to draw attention to some other evils . . . which are felt very seriously and grievously . . . to the unfailing bad treatment of native passengers of all classes and grades, no distinctions being made between them. . . . they have to suffer the greatest insolence, impudence, hard language, contempt, and ill usage, from the menials of the railway police and lower level railway officials . . . this Indiscriminate abuse is lavished freely without regard to differences in rank and social scale. . . . Passengers have often been struck and otherwise treated with great indignity. . . . Those like the intending second class passengers are not allowed to get in even to the platform, but made to herd with the masses outside. . . . In connection with what may be termed railway licenses or official outrages, we have to set forth the painful fact that the most respectable natives are liable to personal ill-treatment and loss of honor from their European fellow passengers in the second-class carriages. The evil is of such magnitude that we would humbly beg the most serious attention given it. Native gentlemen of birth and respectability, in
striving to avoid the large crowds and company to be found in third-class carriages find themselves even worse off in a second class seat. In a variety of ways attempts are incessantly made to degrade and insult native second-class passengers. (6)

The perceived loss of “honor” for those of “birth and respectability” was a consequence, in this view, of the official flattening of the dynamic social hierarchies that fissured colonized communities. This elite male discourse on “honor” found its sharpest and most persistent articulation in the anxiety spawned by the presence of women in the public spaces of the colonial modern.

A central focus of early petitions concerned the ways in which existing practices rendered railway travel “impossible” for “respectable women”:

it is most desirable to bring native ladies to travel by the rail; but as long as the evils as we have shown above continue, this very desirable consummation will be an impossibility. . . . we want to draw attention here to the present impossibility of native ladies of respectable birth and breeding taking advantage of railways. . . . the mode of allotting a separate carriage for females, as in some trains in the Punjab and Bombay presidency, does not meet the wants we complain of. . . . respectable native gentleman will not tolerate a separation from their wives, specially in such public places as the railway line. . . . some special provision is required for respectable [purdah nasbeen] ladies including the possibility of mounting platforms from their palanquins and the provision of separate retiring rooms . . . the lower classes hardly require any special provision to meet their case, as these women are always visible to every one. . . . the honour of our wives and families is very dear and sacred to us, and the advent of the railway has cut off old modes of transit without providing adequate ones for respectable women. (6–7)

This protectionist discourse sought to ensure that middle-class women of “birth and breeding” remain folded within a domestic, private space. They were to remain rooted, even while mobile, in proximate kin networks and familial surroundings. What provoked particular anxiety was not only the circulation and visibility of “respectable” women in “such public places as the railway line.” It was the absence of precise distinctions between the always already “visible” subaltern female body and those marked by birth and respectability. In his remarkable travelogue, Bholanauth Chunder observed the practice of peering through ekkas (buggies) stationed outside the Delhi
railway station in the late 1860s to catch a glimpse of “faces of females whom the rash innovator, Rail, had drawn out from the seclusion of their zenanas, to throw them unto the rude gaze of the public.”31

In 1871, Raja Shiva Prasad, the author of the first systematic history of India in Hindi (1864), designed a carriage for upper-caste “purdah ladies.” His accompanying memorandum addressed to the Railway Department was a potent mixture of a critique of colonial racialization and an elite paternalism:

The liability of compartments — occupied by ladies who live habitually in absolute seclusion — to be entered suddenly by railway guards and ticket collectors renders traveling by railway prohibitory to them. . . . it proves a bar against traveling by railway for ‘purdah nasbeen’ women. . . . All native ladies of rank will prefer to travel in bullock carts from one corner of India to the other, than expose themselves to the gaze of European ticket-collectors. . . . If it is urged that persons who wish to travel by the railway must conform to the usages of railway traveling everywhere observed (I have already pointed out the difference in first-class compartments reserved for European women), it must be replied that, from the particular customs of this country, women of rank cannot appear in public. Sooner than be exposed to the gaze of a stranger of the opposite sex, they will certainly forgo the advantages of railway travel. If such traveling is to become popular, or even possible, for women of rank, some concessions must be made. Railway traveling itself, if in the first instance rendered practical and convenient to them, may in the end lend most powerfully to modify this habit [purdah nasbeen], but it must be first made possible.32

His design for a carriage reserved for “purdah ladies” was not accepted. It was argued that “the Lieutenant Governor considers that the accommodation provided for native third class females is sufficient, and that the better class of native females can always secure seclusion and private bathroom accommodation by traveling second class as befits their rank and position.”33

Scores of petitions sent to railway authorities and numerous newspaper articles, during the 1860s and beyond, elaborated various modes of regulating the mobility of “respectable” women and secluding them from the public gaze. The various proposals advanced to ensure the enclosure of the female body with such means as curtains, folding portable doors, palanquins, obscured windows, and so forth transposed familiar features from the
everyday built environment of the patriarchal home onto the terrain of railway space. These proposals were part of an attempt by middle-class male colonial subjects to contain the reach and scope of the colonial appropriation of space by marking the middle-class female body as inalienable, domestic (national) property precisely as it became potentially more mobile. An article published in 1869 in the *Ukbhar Alum* expressed the painstaking detail of the remarkable numbers of proposals sent to railway authorities:

The coaches in which women travel should be of three grades, as they are now for men or first, second and third class; they should be nicely enclosed on all sides, the venetians to be so contrived that nothing can be seen through them, which is not the case with those in use; that the glass windows should, in addition, have a plank to be pulled up or down by a screw at will; the carriages inside should have different spaces, screened off with cloth, so that although they may all sit in the same carriage, there will be different compartments for them. . . . there should be a bath-room in each carriage; and in order that they should not be inconvenienced at stations, the station-master’s wife should be appointed to see that a room properly screened is ready for women travelers, so that they may be able to go in and out of carriages without being exposed. . . . further, that in each carriage an *ayah* [female maid] be kept to attend upon native ladies, and convey messages between the ladies and their husbands during the journey; and that at both small and large stations, palanquins, doolies, bearers etc be provided at a cost. . . . the present system jumbles all classes together. . . . respectable women are placed in indiscriminate association with common women . . . and are subjected to the degradation of sitting with women of lower ranks, who often are doubtful characters . . . and such doubtful, public women are, according to the custom of this country, regarded and looked upon the same as men.34

Such proposals echoed, if in a different key, not only official anxieties about the regulation of particularized bodies in public spaces but the practice of mobile incarceration constitutive of colonial railway travel. The increased presence and mobility of undesirable gendered and classed bodies was a common theme of middle-class vernacular newspaper accounts across regional contexts.

The sustained mobilization around the mobility of female bodies spawned a protracted official debate. Colonial railway authorities acknowl-
edged the volumes of petitions and letters received from “reliable native sources which indicated the prevalent feelings amongst natives of the better classes that it is not desirable that females while traveling should be separated from their male relatives or protectors . . . and that special provisions are necessary for women from the upper grades of society.” Railway authorities introduced separate, reserved compartments on second- and third-class carriages for “native women of rank” at extra cost on many lines in the early 1870s. Both colonial state agencies and elite male subjects conjured female bodies as the repository of a reified tradition along discrete class lines. Middle-class female bodies were sequestered outside the public gaze but within the protective sphere of the colonial state. In contrast, subaltern female bodies, categorized as “public property,” were literally and symbolically externalized.

Although gender anxieties about railway space were articulated by middle-class male subjects, there was a stunning convergence in narratives of railway travel across class lines. The characterization of railway travel as a form of “slavery” was a recurrent motif. The following account published in 1869 in the *Najmool Akhbar* is exemplary:

The railway department is insufficiently appreciative of the value of their third class passengers from which a large amount of passenger revenues is derived. . . . consider the practice of locking the doors of third class carriages, so that if anyone wants to get out at any station, and asks the peon to open the door, it depends entirely upon the temper of the peon whether he will do so or not. . . . In England and other European countries, it is not the custom, why, then, should a difference be made between other countries and here? There is no justification for this whatsoever, except that the people of this country are mild and humble, and whether you bind us with ropes, or lock us up, we are silent.

A letter to the editor published in the *Rohilkhand Akhbar* observed:

The natives of this country are treated worse than beasts in a cage. . . . Is it not incumbent upon the government to protect the poor from the oppression of the powerful? . . . the European employees consider themselves proprietors of the train and carriages, and never do anything without abuse. It is with abuse that they lock up passengers into carriages, and it is with abuse that they open the doors for them to get out.
Such narratives underscored the distance between official narratives on railways as the carriers of the dreamworld of a uniform modernity and popular perceptions of them as the prison house of colonial rule. Railways, a state work unlike any other, took center stage in popular debates. They became the vehicle for systematic critiques of colonial domination. The experience of railway space was increasingly presented as exemplary of the constitutive hierarchies of colonial rule as such. An article in the *Rahbar-I-Hind* of Lahore observed:

Any one traveling by railways in India will be struck with the invidious distinctions made between Europeans and native passengers. . . . this is the case even in the signboards placed for wash rooms . . . those intended for Europeans are classed “Gentleman’s waiting rooms” whilst those for Natives are styled ‘natives’. We do not feel the least mortified at being called thus, but the term gentlemen is used for Europeans only, in contradistinction to the natives of this country. . . . the wide gulf that separates the two classes, that is, the European subjects of Her Imperial Majesty and native subjects . . . is part of the discrimination between England and India. . . . this is as follows a) there is a parliament in England, but not in India b) In England laws are made with the consent of the people, but here new laws are forced upon the people against their will c) Englishmen are eligible for the highest offices in England, but here a native cannot obtain even a deputy commissionership d) The home government assists English merchants and traders in carrying on trade, but the natives receive no aid from the government of India. (1870, 220–23)

Although railway travel reinforced and made visible internal differentiations along class, gender, and “respectability” lines, it also enabled the translation, over time, of these different perspectives into systematic and comprehensive visions of the political and social world. The consolidation of notions of colonial space as a contradictory whole, and its subsequent recasting in popular discourse as an organic national space, was enabled by and expressed the lived unevenness of colonial space. The growing currency of claims, during the 1870s and 1880s, of an organic tie between individuals and national space, of an isomorphic relationship between history, territory, and identity, attests to the profound dislocations wrought by colonial space-time.

In their railway journeys, late-nineteenth-century colonial subjects both encountered and challenged the visible hierarchies and divisions that struc-
tured the new spaces of colonial modernity. The colonial project of regulating and containing local bodies was not completely effective, especially in regard to the colonization of consciousness. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the constitutive hierarchies of railway space-time were contested in various forms and registers and not only by the delegates of the Indian National Congress, who traveled to the annual meetings from 1885 onward by rail. These included the proliferation of critical petitions, debates within vernacular public spheres, the deliberate courting of arrest by entering first-class European railway compartments, the stoppage of trains, widespread pilfering of railway stock, the rapid growth of groups classified as "railway criminal tribes" that resisted the disciplinary practices of the ubiquitous railway police, and the like. By the turn of the century, the experience of railway travel became a central leitmotif in collective and individual narratives of radicalization in colonial India and the wider imperial field as suggested, for instance, by Gandhi's iconic experience of racialization on the South African railway lines. Indeed, Gandhi devoted an entire chapter of his autobiography to the “Woes of Third Class passengers” and denounced railways as the embodiment of the interlock between capitalism and colonial rule. By the 1920s, the revolt of colonized bodies gathered fury and force in the staging of mass protests, demonstrations, and violence directed against railway stations, lines, and rolling stock. Out of the experience of state space were forged increasingly systemic understandings of colonial space-time, forms of domination, and social hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

Railways have now linked up different parts of the country and have constituted India into, as it were, one market. The deficiency in one part of India now makes itself felt all over the country within a very short space of time and is made good at once, the rise in the price-level being comparatively small. Every village and every district which is connected by rail are no longer self-supporting units. The powerful and ubiquitous agency of organized commerce has taken the place of the former system, the isolated and self-sufficing village.


Reader: Be that as it may, all the disadvantages of railways are more than counter-balanced by the fact that it is due to them that we see in India the new spirit of nationalism. . . .

Editor: I hold this to be a mistake. The English have taught us that we were not one nation before, and that it will require centuries before we make one nation. This is
without foundation. We were one nation before they came to India. . . . Only you and I and others who consider ourselves civilized and superior persons imagine that we are many nations. It was after the advent of railways that we began to believe in distinctions, and you are at liberty now to say that it is through the railways that we are beginning to abolish these distinctions. An opium-eater may argue the advantage of opium-eating from the fact that he began to understand the evil of the opium habit after having eaten it. I would ask you to understand well what I have said on the railways.

—M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, 1910

During the last third of the nineteenth century, the consolidation of colonial state space spawned the formation of an insurgent grammar of political economy that assumed nationalist shape in the 1870s and 1880s. It was within this context that sections of an ascendant colonial middle class began to reflect on the transformations wrought by colonial practices. Writing at the turn of the century from this national developmentalist perspective, K. L. Dutta emphasized the homogenizing function of railways, especially their significance in producing a single market by integrating local economies into an overarching dynamic and complex economic grid. As mediums of massive spatial and social restructuring, railways in the nineteenth century, wherever installed, at once “diminished and expanded space,” that is, they simultaneously opened up new spaces not previously accessible while stripping them of their spatial presence or unique character by destroying the space between them. For Dutta, unlike Gandhi, the fact that one of the casualties of railways was the “isolated and self-sufficing village” inspired neither nostalgia nor moral outrage. Such casualties merely punctuated the perceived inexorable path toward the universal goal of development that the fantastic spectacle of colonial space promised yet failed to deliver and which a postcolonial national state would ultimately make good on. However, if one strand of nationalist responses to colonial domination thematized its homogenizing function, another more prevalent and politically potent response bemoaned its particularizing and differentiating effects. These seemingly opposed responses derived from shared everyday experiences of a colonial state space that was at once homogenizing and fragmenting.

The contradictory texture of colonial state space—the proliferating economic and cultural distinctions together with various effects of homogenization—engendered longings for a transcendent organic space-time. Among the most passionately felt responses to colonial unevenness was Gandhi’s articulation of eternal, organic, self-enclosed forms of community.
In 1909, while returning to South Africa from Britain by ship, Gandhi wrote in ten days, in Gujarati and on ship stationary, what would become a foundational nationalist text titled *Hind Swaraj*. In this work he identified railways not only as “having impoverished” the country, echoing the ideas of Romesh Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji, but as being a constitutive “disease” of modern industrial civilization (the two terms *industrialization* and *civilization* were, for Gandhi, interchangeable). Railways had, he argued, generated a space riven by “distinctions” and peopled by alienated subjects whose internal relations were defined by a new “aloofness.” The violence of the “life-corroding competition” generalized by modern civilization had erased the earlier knowledge that “India was one undivided land so made by nature” (68, 49). Gandhi articulated his critique of “cursed modern civilization” from the normative and literal ground of an “India” that had remained supposedly exempt from the “kudbaro” or barbarism of capitalism and colonialism (70, 34). He implored the subjects of the differentiated space of colonial India to discard the alien and alienating space of colonial rule by inhabiting instead this pure, inviolate place:

The inhabitants of that part of India will very properly laugh at your new-fangled notions. The English do not rule over them, nor will you ever rule over them. Those in whose name we speak we do not know, nor do they know us. I would certainly advise you and others like you who love the motherland to go into the interior that has not yet been polluted by the railways, and to live there for six months, you might then be patriotic and speak of home rule. (34)

This posited place-time, the unpolluted “interior,” was literally and figuratively placed beyond the railway line. The assumed alterity of the “interior” had ensured the retention of its aauratic character, its spatiotemporal uniqueness and presence. This imagined “interior,” composed of village communities pursuing an authentic mode of existence, was conjured by Gandhi both as the original inside of the nation and its normative future. The interior was by this reckoning a pure space of authentic immediacy unpolluted by the abstraction and fragmentation that defined colonial space. Although this strand of nationalist discourse appeared to recognize the coexistence of economic and cultural unevenness, it repressed the historicity of its own vision of a timeless national locale whether located in the present or in a normative future. For the expressed longing for an organic national interior was rooted within, even as it sought to overcome, the internal contradictions of colonial state space.
It is one of the deepest ironies of postcolonial India that the more radical strains of Gandhianism, especially its radical communitarian impulse, have more often than not been domesticated as the legitimating ground for the modernizing imperatives that the postcolonial state embraced as its own. This vexed fate has been especially apparent in the status of Indian railways—which, with 1.6 million employees, is the largest employer in the world—as an institutional and symbolic node for concretizing the project of national developmentalism and cultural homogenization.

In the contemporary era, railways are a chief leitmotif in the ongoing practices and rituals of Indian nationhood. Following the lineaments of the nationalist critique of colonial rule, the postcolonial developmentalist regime, particularly in its Nehruvian avatar, sought to overcome the inherited colonial geography of uneven development by extending infrastructures and capital investments to so-called backward regions understood to have temporally lagged behind the nation as a whole. Contemporary popular culture and official discourse have long presented railways—which carry more than eleven million passengers daily in contemporary India—as collective national property, as engines of national development, and as a literal portal for national pilgrimages undertaken by secular citizens. These representations carry the imprint of the nationalist critique of colonial capitalism and the mass mobilization campaigns of the early twentieth century. Following Gandhi’s injunction and during the noncooperation movement of the 1920s, many self-understood nationalists spent extended time in rural areas in order both to mobilize and discipline the masses in “whose name” they spoke. This practice, with its ritualistic and pedagogical overtones of cultural purification, was institutionalized in the Nehruvian era in the form of mandatory all-India rail journeys for covenanted government officials (the postcolonial “competition wallahs” of the Indian Foreign Service, Indian Administrative Service, Indian Railway Service, and the like) as part of their training for public service. The accompanying motif of rail travel as sacred national duty imbues as well English-language and vernacular slogans of the Department of Tourism that proclaim “Discover India, Discover yourself.” Such slogans, which gained broad currency in the transnational marketing circuits of the 1970s and 1980s in India as well as the United States and Japan, instructed Indians to undertake rail journeys as part of a collective national pilgrimage with formally equivalent secular citizens. Whereas colonial discourse privileged railways as a central vector for the expansion of colonial capitalism, the railways are for the postcolonial state a literal and symbolic carrier of both an iconic Indianness and the attempted
formation, at least during the preliberalization era, of an economically homogenous national space.

Railways remain central to the avowed postcolonial nationalist project—besieged as it is by its own spectacular tensions—of suturing the uneven space-time of contemporary India. Given the pivotal place railways occupy in the nationalist imaginary, it is not surprising that they were prominent in the festivities marking the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence. On August 15, 1997, an “exhibition” train consisting of carriages named after the principal mountains and rivers of India embarked from the central station in New Delhi to traverse the main trunk lines of India. The train’s passage symbolically reenacted the appropriation of colonial space as national space and the isomorphism of state, nation, and space. By invoking the ancient Vedic ritual of a horse sacrifice whereby a chakravartin (universal monarch) would perform his sovereignty through the vahan (vehicle) of a horse sent across the kingdom, the “national exhibition” train reiterated constructions of India as a transhistorical national entity. Emptied of people yet replete with models, dioramas, photographs of nationalist leaders, historical charts depicting “the country’s march into the 21st century,” and scenes from national history, the carriages of the train embodied the doubled image of railways as containers of both the future and the past of India. Conceived in accord with the linear, teleological framework of nationalist historiography, the exhibits threaded together such disparate events as the establishment of the East India Company, the 1857 rebellion, the achievement of independence in 1947, the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, and the like as part of a continuous national space-time. This staged display, which closely cleaved to the generic conventions of statist and nationalist aesthetics, charted the predictable coordinates of national history for citizenspectators. If the choreographed movements of the “exhibition” train concretized the imagined linearity of national time, it did so through the flattening of history into ordered spatial bits enclosed within one of the paradigmatic spaces of the national popular in India—the railway carriage. What is more, the exhibition train could not quite excise the specter of 1947. For the ghostly train unwittingly summoned what, for millions of people in northern India, remains one of the most pressing collective memories of 1947: the horror of trains arriving at stations, carrying the bodies of slaughtered Muslims and Hindus across the newly nationalized territory of the emergent nation-states of Pakistan and India.