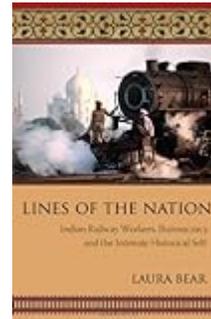




Laura Bear. *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self.* The Culture of History Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 360 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14002-7.



Reviewed by David A. Campion (Lewis & Clark College)

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Commissioned by Patrick R. Young (University of Massachusetts-Lowell)

Power, Identity, and Moral Order in the Indian Railway

“There is something very interesting in a first railway journey in Bengal,” wrote a young G. O. Trevelyan in 1864. “Never was I so impressed with the triumphs of progress ... those two thin strips of iron, representing as they do the mightiest and the most fruitful conquest of science, stretch hundreds of miles across the boundless Eastern plains—rich, indeed, but tilled by a race far below the most barbarous Europeans in all the qualities that give good hope for the future of a nation.”^[1] Trevelyan’s observations capture succinctly the paradoxical nature of the railway in colonial India as understood by both the British and Indians. To the former, it was first and foremost a technological wonder—indeed, appearing all the more wondrous in contrast to what they perceived to be the benighted and static country across which it moved. As an instrument of progress and a testament to the transformative power and universal benefit of Western “modernity,” the railway served to justify British political and economic control over the subcontinent as much as it enabled it. For the latter, however, the railway often stood as the most physical symbol of Indian sub-

ordination to their colonial masters while curiously also remaining the Achilles’ heel of the British Raj. From Mahatma Gandhi’s famous antimodern polemic against the railways in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) to the later train bombings by Indian revolutionaries, the railways served as an arena in which relationships of power were defined, obeyed, resisted, and redefined during the apex of the colonial regime through its demise and into the decades following independence.

Laura Bear’s *Lines of the Nation* makes a rich and sophisticated contribution to the growing scholarship on the Indian railways. Her ethnohistorical study focuses on the Eastern Railway that spanned Bengal and Bihar, the oldest line in India and one of its most heavily traveled. The labor force of this railway, like those of other rail networks in India, was staffed disproportionately by Anglo-Indians (Eurasians of British and South Asian descent). These people, Bear argues, became a specially created “caste” within Indian society, one that straddled uneasily the division between the rulers and the ruled and that was explicitly and inescapably tied to the colonial enter-

prise and embedded in its bureaucracy. Apart from being mere cogs in the machinery of the colonial state, Anglo-Indian railway workers and their families lived in separate special railway colonies and came to be defined in the most intimate and lasting ways by colonial concepts of racial, social, and occupational pedigree and class stratification. These combined with their own evolving self-definitions, both as individuals and as a community, based on notions of *jati* (caste, broadly conceived), kinship, and lineage, as well as on their role within the railway bureaucracy and their relationship with its management elite. Underpinning Bear's approach to her subject is a persuasive challenge to the longstanding historiography of the Indian railway that has presented this institution primarily as the chief means of introducing India to the forces of industrial capitalism and creating its first modern labor force. Instead, her focus is on the more fluid and dynamic amoral universe of the railways beyond its institutional, economic, or political dimensions.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 draws mainly on archival sources and presents a detailed historical narrative of the development of India's railway from its origins in the tense decade before the Revolt of 1857 through the heady first years after independence. Richly descriptive chapters recreate the world of the Indian railway by examining such details as station design, train compartmentalization, segregation policies, security measures, medical screening of employees, company bureaucracy, and patterns of labor unrest or acquiescence. Beyond the public sphere of the stations, train sheds, and track lines, Bear also explores the domestic side of railway communities: how they worshipped, schooled themselves, created their own hierarchies, spent their leisure time, and reacted to the rising nationalism throughout India in the early decades of the twentieth century. These illuminating facets are meticulously pieced together into a larger mosaic that reveals the complexity of this organization so central to the survival and success of both the colonial state and the Indian nation.

Part 2 shifts to a more anthropological approach drawn largely from fieldwork among present-day Anglo-Indian railway families in the company town of Kharagpur in West Bengal. The postcolonial legacy of the railway colony has been most keenly felt by the Anglo-Indians. Of mixed race and almost entirely Christian, their occupational, social, and cultural status in India (which was never truly secure to begin with) became even more precarious in the years after independence. As a railway caste, neither British nor Indian, their root-

less identity had been a quality valued by the colonial rulers in an occupation that demanded constant mobility. Likewise, their natural alienation from Indian society was perceived as an asset rather than a liability when it came to entrusting a segment of population with operating and maintaining the most valuable machinery of the state. Of course Anglo-Indians were not the only group that formed the Eastern Railway labor force. Domiciled Europeans and Bengali Hindus also staffed the railway in large numbers, with the former virtually disappearing as the British prepared to depart and the latter increasing after independence. Yet the Anglo-Indians bear special attention. After independence, this community struggled to find a place for itself in postcolonial India since it had been so heavily associated with the colonial regime, its very existence owing to encounters of the most intimate sort between the rulers and the ruled. Bear's engaging and sympathetic portrait of these people and of the long shadow that the colonial past continues to cast over their present circumstances is perhaps the most original and compelling contribution of the book.

The most intriguing part of the book is the fifth chapter, which draws primarily from petitions filed by individual workers lodging complaints or seeking restitution from senior railway executives. These documents provide intimate and often heartfelt details of physical and psychological abuse, humiliation, wrongful termination, and insult to personal or family honor. Bear distinguishes these records from the more prosaic and tedious official files of meeting minutes, policy and procedural statements, wages and allowances, tariff rates, and the volumes of statistics of every sort. Clearly these petitions stand out as a voice from below, one that employs the amoral language of violence, tyranny, suffering, and despair in opposition to the detached and often sanitized official view of the bureaucrats at the top (p. 108). Their voice is central to the argument of the book. The records of all branches of the colonial government contain volumes of petitions, and while these documents (and the responses they received) serve to expose the inner workings of railway discipline and morality, they require both caution and skepticism in their handling. By their nature, they reflect manipulation through half-truths, and their self-serving ends are no less significant than those contained in the less intimate official records of the colonial power structure. Bear's enthusiasm for this type of document is evident, and, at times, the individual petitions themselves can seem overanalyzed and infused with deeper significance than is obvious to the reader based on the excerpted passages. Nevertheless, taken to-

gether the petitions are illustrative of larger patterns of community identity, notions of morality, and the intricate relationship between the colonial state and the labor force on which it relied.

As an interdisciplinary study in history and anthropology, *Lines of the Nation* succeeds by following in a tradition of South Asian scholarship established by Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, and Laura Ann Stoler. Indeed Stoler's well-known critique of the colonial archive is applied with satisfying effect in this study. As a work of historical scholarship, it is widely and meticulously researched, drawing on an impressive array of archives and published sources. As an anthropological study, it is equally impressive. Indeed, the two parts of the book

complement each other well and, as a whole, the methodologies and arguments are compelling and original. *Lines of the Nation* is a substantial contribution to the study of the railway in South Asian history and society. Beyond that, it offers much that can inform larger debates about the nature of identity at the individual, community, and national levels and about the complex dynamics and contradictions of "morality" in colonized societies. As Bear rightly concludes, "moralizing bureaucracies do not produce moral orders, but instead create ethical dilemmas for bureaucrats and clients alike" (p. 295).

Note

[1]. G. O. Trevelyan, *The Competition Wallah*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1866), 22.

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