



CALCUTTA  
RESEARCH  
GROUP  
[www.morg.ac.in](http://www.morg.ac.in)



Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen  
Institute for Human Sciences

# JOURNEYS

and internal migrant workers

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY  
OF RAILWAY CONNECTIVITY

ishita dey

**Journeys and Internal Migrant Workers:  
An Ethnographic Study of Railway Connectivity**

by Ishita Dey

Copyright: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

**All Rights Reserved**

First published: 2023

Published by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group  
IA-48, Ground Floor,  
Sector III, Salt Lake City  
Kolkata: 700097

Printed by Graphic Image  
Graphic Image  
New Market, New Complex, West Block 2nd Floor, Room No. 115,  
Kolkata-87

Cover Photo: *Inside a Sleeper Compartment*, © Ishita Dey

This publication is part of the Calcutta Research Group (CRG)–Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna programme on “Justice, Protection, and Government of the People: A Two-Year Research and Orientation Programme on Protection and Democracy in a Post-COVID World (2021-2023).”

**Disclaimer**

*The views, opinions and expressions in the articles/reports in this publication are entirely the author's own and the facts are as stated and reported by the author/s, and the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) is not in anyway responsible or liable for the content.*

**Journeys and Internal Migrant Workers**  
**An Ethnographic Study of Railway**  
**Connectivity**

**Ishita Dey**

**Calcutta Research Group**



*dedicated*

*to*

*pravasi mazdoor who continue to travel against all odds*



## Acknowledgements

This journey would not have begun without the questions I was left with after an exciting collaborative project on “Transit Labour” co-anchored by Calcutta Research Group which introduced me to the literature on logistics and infrastructure. I remain thankful to Professor Brett Neilson, Professor Ned Rossitier, and Professor Ranabir Samaddar for inviting me to be part of the platform. The genesis of the idea of migrant journeys took shape in 2021 and I took a leap of faith to present this idea in a discussion on “Researching ‘Journeys’: Challenges and Possibilities in Migration Studies,” in the Seminar Series on Forced Migration organised by Calcutta Research Group and the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna under the Europe Asia Research Platform co-anchored by Professor Ayse Caglar and Professor Ranabir Samaddar. I remain grateful for the comments and suggestions I received in the seminar in December 2022 especially from Professor Ayse Caglar, Professor Shahram Khosravi, and Professor Manish Jha.

I went for a pilot study in December 2022 following which Professor Ranabir Samaddar and Professor Sabyasachi Basu Raychaudhury invited me to share a proposal. I could not be more thankful that this project which is part of a larger project found a home in Calcutta Research Group specially so because my formative years of training. I hope readers of this report will treat this as an entry point to reading journeys and hopefully this will translate into a bigger project on studying train journeys and other transportation networks. Special thanks to Professor Manish K. Jha for sharing his insights and lending a patient ear to my preliminary field findings.

I remain indebted to Calcutta Research Group and Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna for the research support towards the fieldwork under its project on “Justice, Protection, and Government of the People: A Two Year Research and Orientation Programme on Protection and Democracy in a Post-Covid World (2021–2023).” I thank my students at South Asian University, Delhi, who remained a source of strength and support during this fieldwork. I thank the competent authorities for sanctioning the much-needed Duty Leave to conduct the fieldwork in the middle of the semester.

I remain immensely grateful to Professor Yuri Kazepov and Professor Ayse Caglar for facilitating my stay as a research fellow as part of “The Challenge of Urban Futures” of University of Vienna from October 1–31, 2023, where I presented a part of this study. I thank Professor Ayse Caglar for her comments, suggestions and generosity during my Vienna stay.

This fieldwork would not be possible without Niraj Kumar who remains a friend and fellow traveller from a praxis based research programme in Ambedkar University Delhi. Niraj thank you for introducing me to Saba Parveen and Akhilesh Raj, co travellers of this journey. Saba Parveen and Akhilesh Raj brought their field acumen and their perspective remains central to this work. Thank you. Sudatta Ghosh, thank you for the transcribing the recorded interviews amidst tight schedules. My interlocutors remain the core of this work. Migrant workers who embraced me, IRCTC vendors who became my mediators and most importantly migrant workers who allowed me to record their life stories amidst gruelling journeys through spring, summer and monsoon.

Colleagues at the CRG office, Debashree, Rajat, Shatabdi, Rituparna, Samareshda, Parthada, and Subhashree, facilitated many requests, and I salute them for their patience and for keeping me on track and on time. Debalina and Barnini, who opened their homes in Mumbai, deserve special thanks.

The photographs (including the cover) have been clicked on my mobile phone.

Ishita Dey  
South Asian University  
New Delhi  
&  
Calcutta Research Group

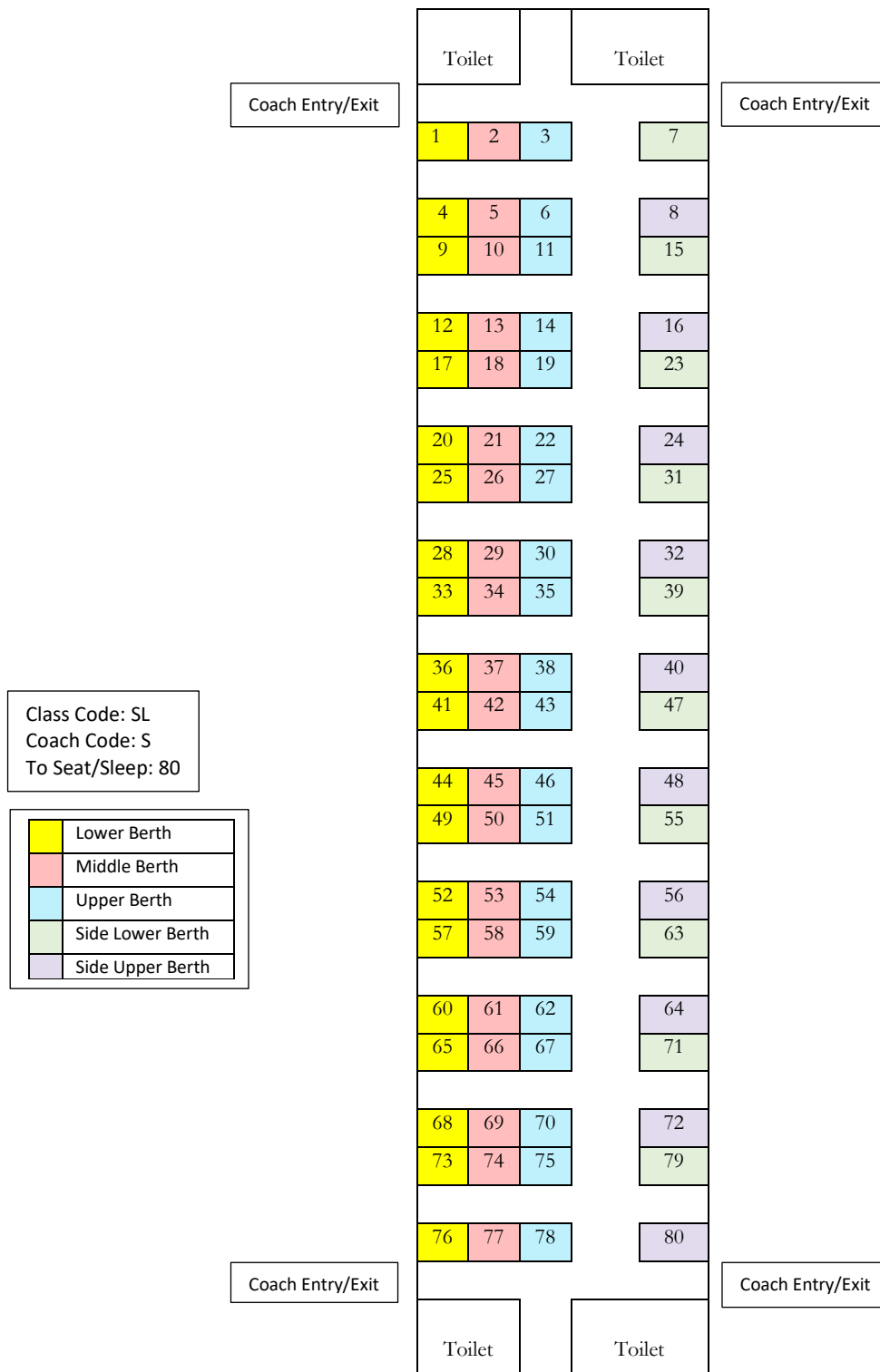


# **Journeys and Internal Migrant Workers An Ethnographic Study of Railway Connectivity**

**Ishita Dey**

## **Contextualising Migrant Trajectories of Bihar**

On December 22, 2022, during my first recce visit from Bhagalpur to Mumbai, we got confirmed berths in two Sleeper coaches, S3 and S4. Long-distance trains for commuters have three types of compartments—Unreserved coaches, Sleeper coaches (where each passenger is assigned a berth number to sit during the day and sleep at night), and two categories of air-conditioned coaches—Second AC and Third AC. The Second AC or AC 2 tier is the acronym for air-conditioned coaches with six berths. Unlike the Third AC or AC 3 tier, there is no middle berth, and it is spacious. There are curtains and reading lights for each passenger. The Third AC or AC 3 tier is an air-conditioned coach with eight berths. Depending on the coach AC 3 tier has a carrying capacity between 64–72 berths. Commuters receive free bedsheets, blankets, and a pillow on certain trains. In some trains, there is also a provision of free food. In this report, I focus on Sleeper coaches of Lokmanyatilak Express with 80 berths. Each compartment has two entry and exit doors. Numbers of berths are placed strategically near the entrance/ exit doors and on the windows so that passengers waiting at the station can spot their berth number. The halting time for most stations on these long-distance trains ranges between 2 minutes to a maximum of 10 minutes. Each Sleeper coach has two washroom facilities, each with a sink, mirror, dustbin, and Indian lavatory/Western commode at two ends of the compartment apart from a sink with a mirror and a waste bin right outside the facilities. The passageway between the two facilities connects one Sleeper coach to the other. Sleeper coaches are typically arranged in sets of two lower berths, two middle berths, two upper berths, and one side upper and one side lower berth. There are two common passages: one between the two sets of lower, middle, and upper berths, which are meant for people to rest their feet, and the second passage is along the side of the upper and lower berth, which is the connecting passageway to 80 berths. The common passageways next to the washroom, entry-exit doors, and the two mentioned above are critical to migrant journeys. Luggage can be stored below the seats, primarily the lower berths, apart from steel pegs for water bottles, bags, etc. Usually, two power points are available for charging phones, and each unit has



**Figure 1:** Diagrammatic representation of seat map of Sleeper coach Non-AC (Type: LHB), etrain.info, accessed February 6, 2024, [https://etrain.info/page/seatmap/SL\\_LHB](https://etrain.info/page/seatmap/SL_LHB).

at least two to three fans and lights. During the day, the seats assigned as middle berths are folded so passengers can sit at their designated berths. In Sleeper coaches, there is no provision for bedsheets or pillows. Usually, people carry bedsheets and use a small bag or backpack as a makeshift pillow. In winter, people carry bedsheets and blankets as the weather becomes chilly.

The long distance trains have a dedicated pantry unit called pantry car to cook and serve fresh food. The outsourced staff of Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC)<sup>1</sup> sells tea, breakfast items, fried snacks, and lunch and dinner packs across the Air-conditioned and Sleeper coaches. Local vendors board these long distance trains to sell food items ranging from spicy mix of puffed rice, to boiled chana, samosa, tea and water bottles. Apart from food items mobile chargers, electronic gadgets and plastic toys are some of the items sold in these trains.

On December 2022 when we began our recce visit, the weather was very chilly, and we reached Bhagalpur railway station almost one and a half hours before the departure of the train. My co-travellers, Saba Parveen and Akhilesh Raj, the two assistants who accompanied me for this leg of the journey and continued to work on the project, were then based in Giridih, Jharkhand. We decided to meet in Deogarh and travel to Bhagalpur station. We started looking for a tea vending stall when we reached the station. We realised we just had to follow the sound of someone calling out, chai...chai. The cacophony of bus horns, e-rickshaws, private vehicles, specially motorbikes, and salespersons calling out prospective customers to their eateries was quite common across bus stations and railway stations across Indian cities and towns. Surprisingly, I realised that Akhilesh had requested one of his friends to come to the station. He quickly whisked us away to a tea vendor who seemed to know him. Then he advised us to have breakfast at one of the eateries outside the station premises, Marwari Bhojonalay. As per the bright vinyl hoarding of the shop the place served breakfast and lunch. Most people having breakfast settled for round fried flatbread called puri and subji (which inevitably meant potato curry). We settled for a vegetarian *thali* (assorted meal platter) of roti, fried bitter gourd, fried potato, and dal. Students, and workers with backpacks came in and out to grab a bite. On our way back to the station, we spotted a few intra-state buses, both owned by the state transport corporation and privately run operators around the station premises of Bhagalpur. During my previous day's travel from Patna to Deogarh, covering a distance of approximately 254km via National Highway 333, I spotted few buses on the highways compared to shared autorickshaws and shared cycle vans apart from motorcycles and bicycles. However, at nooks and turns of this bumpy and, at times, smooth ride, one could hear the sounds of trains passing by from the signature sound of train horns that has enveloped our imagination of train as a symbol of modernity, middle class nostalgia of summer holidays, mobility and a place of mixings. When we reached the station, we could see a stream of people running with backpacks to queue up for the long serpentine queue for non-reserved coaches. We tried talking to a few passengers about their preparedness for this journey. Some of them were not sure if they would find a spot. One of the workers said, "Until and unless you enter the compartment, you would not know if

you will have a seat to rest your bum or you will have to stand. Usually, we adjust.” This adjustment, depending on the length of the journey, can stretch from 24 hours to 72 hours.



Figure 2: Passengers use backpacks to reserve their spot in the queue for the unreserved coach, © Author

One female passenger waiting to enter the train for a 24-hour journey commented, “We don’t travel like this out of choice. See, I have a ticket.” She took out the ticket for Unreserved compartments and then told me that for women travelling in Unreserved compartments, the journey is a test of how they “control” themselves. “You understand what I mean.” I did not press further. While Indian Railways has reserved compartment seats for “ladies” in Electric Multiple Unit (EMU) coaches,<sup>2</sup> and washrooms earmarked for women are available in railway stations I have not come across any express trains where there is a dedicated toilet for women passengers in Sleeper, Unreserved or Air-conditioned apartments. Indian Railways have taken up sporadic measures of setting up sanitary pad vending machines in railways stations, baby feeding cabins on railway stations but there are no dedicated toilets on trains for women.<sup>3</sup> Women migrants are an integral part of the India’s internal migrant workforce. Uday Chandra introduces us to Janu, the

sister supervisor of construction workers accompanying thirty-odd teenage men and women from Jharkhand to Mumbai. In this one-and-a-half-day train journey, Janu as the female *sirdar* (leader), is the interface for the newly inducted migrant workforce who has the answer to all questions about journeys, “Where are the toilets? How long until the next station? Is it okay to lie down between the doors of the compartment?”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Supurna Banerjee has shown how women migrant workers from Dooars in West Bengal, once synonymous with plantation work, migrate to cities through kin referrals for paid domestic work and or care work in Delhi and the National Capital Region.<sup>5</sup> Women are steadily migrating in search of employment. These studies testify to the gendered labour market in rural-urban migration and a need to move beyond studying migrants at the source and destination.

The source of migration and destination have been critical to ascertain who is a migrant. The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), one of the official sources of enumerating migrant data in India, uses the category migrant for a person who reports that his/her “usual place of residence” has changed after six months. The Migration Report 2020–21 suggests a more significant percentage of male migrants migrating for work search for employment compared to female migrant workers. In 2020–21, 22.8 per cent of male workers migrated “in search of employment/ better employment” and “for employment/work.” As per official statistics, 86.8 per cent of females accounted for marriage related migration.<sup>6</sup> Previously Mazumdar, Neetha, and Agnihotri pointed out that “attributing a single reason for migration in NSS and Census” was also responsible for rendering women invisible in migration data.<sup>7</sup> Amrita Datta feels that the Census of the Government of India and the NSSO fail to capture “worker mobility.” She demonstrates that there is no scope within the Census to collect data on “temporary and short-term migration” and “National Sample Survey Organisation uses a six-month cut-off point of six months to define short-term migration.”<sup>8</sup> I concur with Datta that there is a bias towards focussing on a long term and permanent migration in data collection. There is a lack of data on “short-term and circular migration.”<sup>9</sup> Datta defines a “migrant” as an individual who was away from the village for a month but visited the village at least once in a year.”<sup>10</sup>

Datta opens the discussion on characteristics of Bihar migration with a powerful statement, “[m]igration is a way of life in rural Bihar” and locates the various claims and counterclaims of outmigration of Bihar.<sup>11</sup> While elected representatives of Bihar repeatedly want to contest the imagination of Bihar as a sending state, several incidents targeting Bihari workers at different places also show how Biharis are perceived in the cities. Equally relevant in this discussion is what happens to women when left behind.<sup>12</sup> Scholarship on Bihari migrants in recent years has attempted to understand the migrant labour at both destination and source. Kumar and Jha studied

migrants from the Kosi region through an intensive study of a few villages in Saharsa district and in working class neighbourhoods of Delhi to examine the relationship among labouring migrants, city, capital, and the state. In the seven villages they studied, they found “every Dalit household sends out migrants except the few which have no adult male member or have someone with a proper job.”<sup>13</sup> Their study clearly shows that rural-to-rural migration is on a decline. At least among agricultural labourers they continue with similar work in Punjab, Haryana, and northernmost districts of Rajasthan. Most of these migrant workers are male; their migration, Kumar and Jha affirm, is “circular.” They migrate for three to six months. However, the authors also reported that the younger workforce doesn’t want to be agricultural labourers, though there is a significant difference in wage rates in Bihar and Punjab, especially for sowing and harvesting wheat and *makhana* (fox nut) cultivation. Their findings suggest a substantial wage difference between agricultural and non-agricultural jobs, and the remittances from non-agricultural work are higher than agricultural work.<sup>14</sup> Das points to a pattern regarding when men return. According to her, “they return twice a year—once during April and once during October–November” apart from sickness, unemployment or for events like marriage. The period between October–November is associated with *Dussehra*, *Diwali*, and *Chhath*.<sup>15</sup> This takes us to the routes of migration. Datta identifies “Rohtas-Gujarat; Madhubani-Delhi; Madhubani-Mumbai; Purnia/Araria-Punjab, Araria-Himachal Pradesh, Madhubani-Bangalore” as “migrant corridors.”<sup>16</sup> Datta shows that though long term migration and circular migration are prevalent in Bihar, migrants belonging to certain districts of Purnia and Araria are part of the short term migration. She also ascertains that the socio economic position of a migrant in the source (in this case, the village and district) also determines the trajectory of the migration.<sup>17</sup> Migrant workers from relatively upper castes tend to be in permanent and stable jobs and part of permanent migration. These studies show that both permanent and short-term migration inform the migration trajectories of male migrant workers from Bihar. Kumar and Jha in their account from Kosi to Delhi, point to the train journeys migrants undertake to reach their place of work and back home. They observe that migrants increasingly prefer “to travel in reserved compartments while returning home” to prevent harassment.<sup>18</sup> Journeys are an important part of the short-term, permanent migration, yet journeys have received less attention in studying migrant lives. Kumar and Jha rightly observe that “train journeys are an important stage in the migration process”<sup>19</sup> especially so in Bihar, as trains facilitated the travel of migrants from this state in Eastern India to Punjab and Delhi in Northern India, Bengaluru in Southern India or Mumbai in Western India. Yet migrant train journeys have remained largely invisible in the context of migration studies in India except in descriptions of arrival and return or in contexts of Partition.

## **From Symbols of Modernity to Sites of Resistance: Trains and Railway Network**

Trains, according to Aguiar are an embodiment of “rhetoric of modernity.”<sup>20</sup> Modernity as a project with colonial roots came with a promise of science, progress, and achievement; the idea of mobility was integral to this. Mobility and modernity, according to Aguiar, are related and tied through material and symbolic representation. Trains represent mobility, and modernity is one of the colonial residues of colonial modernity. Aguiar reminds us that railways in India were part of a colonising project of the British Empire’s “international economy of finance,” among the nineteenth century’s most significant investments. Indian railway construction, as Aguiar shows through the nationalist critique, served the interests of the British finance capital rather than India.<sup>21</sup> Thorner clearly maps this by showing how British traders put pressure on the British Cabinet to ensure their steady supplies of wheat, cotton, and coal. Thorner writes that a segment of British merchants were keen to sell more textiles and import more cotton “from the fields of Western India.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, coal from the mines of West Bengal was the most sought-after commodity. These traders were so powerful that they managed to exert pressure on East India Company to ensure that promoters of Railways secured a good arrangement. The first two lines planned in 1850 and 1854 connected Howrah of West Bengal to its coal mines, and the second line from Bombay to Kalyan would be extended to connect cotton fields. The objective of railways was centered around the colonial extraction of commodities.<sup>23</sup> Railways for Aguiar became a means of colonial rule couched in the language of ‘social improvement’. She writes about Lord Dalhousie’s reflections on his time in India specially his contribution to the “great engines of social improvement”—Railways, Uniform Postage and Electric Telegraph.<sup>24</sup> Railways became a defining moment in mapping technological progress and also deepening social inequality especially between those who could access trains and those who laboured. And given India’s oppressive relationship with caste and gender, it is not a mere coincidence that trains benefitted the growing middle class compared to people who identified themselves as lower castes and/or tribes. This is evident in the spatial division of trains into different segments and classes with varied pricing of tickets and facilities. Aguiar takes us through various newspaper articles and scholarship to show us the experience of Europeans, Indians and women Indian travellers on trains. Writings suggest that Europeans and Indians clashed in the First and Second Class and on most occasions Indians were forced to travel in Third Class. Women passengers were harassed by colonial administrators if found without a ticket. There are extensive newspaper reports of how colonial rulers inflicted sexual violence on women, including rape, during such cases of violation. Trains, in other words, carried several tensions as a space of mixings.

One of the most well-documented experiences of train journeys in literature and social science literature revolves around Partition. This time-efficient symbol of colonial modernity transformed into “death trains” during the Partition of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>25</sup> Partition literature is vivid with “the train carriage, once a symbol of liberation through mobility,” turned “to a place of incarceration where people await their death.”<sup>26</sup> One of the lasting images of Partition that has remained imprinted in our minds is that of an image of an overcrowded train of people with their bare belonging occupying the compartments, roof of train and some faces stretching out of the windows. Images of overcrowded stations of Amritsar on the West and Sealdah on the East are reminders of what was available to people during this time. In my work on Cooper’s Camp, a refugee camp in West Bengal, the two railway tracks near the ruins of a train station is a gentle reminder of this railway route used by people fleeing from East Pakistan into West Bengal. Taking advantage of the “direct” train route from the nearest border to the Cooper’s Camp, Cooper’s Camp swelled with refugees more than it could accommodate in the early 1950s.<sup>27</sup> Sengupta in her work shows how Sealdah station became “a transit point,” a place of exploitation where railway officials and security officials gave food and money to women refugees in exchange of sexual favours.<sup>28</sup> Sengupta writes about the abysmal conditions of sanitation due to lack of sufficient number toilets for men and women and it quickly became a site of contracting waterborne diseases like cholera, tuberculosis, and dysentery. She shows how refugees were shifted from the Sealdah station to neighbouring states of Orissa and Bihar and some were shifted to other districts (Bankura, Midnapore, Hooghly and Murshidabad) of West Bengal. She concludes the state succeeded in fulfilling “two twin objectives—a) reducing congestion of Sealdah and Calcutta, and b) supplying cheap labour to underdeveloped and scarcely populated areas.”<sup>29</sup> Sengupta writes that this move did not deter refugees who decided to “wait.”<sup>30</sup> She quotes a newspaper report published in a Bangla leading daily *Jugantar* of May 5, 1950 to point to state atrocities. 300 refugee shacks around Sealdah station were demolished. Despite these moves Sengupta argues station provided a ray of hope for the refugees, it provided a possibility of waiting, more so for employment and writes, “Calcutta and Sealdah could almost always accommodate another hawker, domestic helper, tailor, shopkeeper, mason or coolie.”<sup>31</sup> Alongside she comments that the refugees were a cheap source of labour for the elites of the city ranging from domestic work, factories, shops in exchange of “a meagre salary, accommodation and/or food. Newspapers like *Jugantar* regularly carried advertisements for cooks, live-in maids, tutors and shop attendants from among the refugees.”<sup>32</sup> Sengupta quotes life stories of Dalit refugees who in their work described the station as a mini East Pakistan and how the station allowed people “waiting time” as they looked for homes, jobs, means to rebuild their lives. Railway platforms, according to



Sengupta have always provided refuge to society's outcastes children who ran away from home, trafficked and addicts.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of Partition, train stations, railway networks, and connectivity also exposed the class divide of who could afford to travel, and who were forced to wait at stations. In the aftermath of the Partition, trains from West Bengal to the then East Pakistan and from West Pakistan to Punjab also became death trains. Shi'ite families who took shelter in Hooghly's Imambarah left in trains to Darshana (one of the check posts of the Bangladesh border). Recounting one such journey one of the interlocutors observed that "the train was too crowded. Everybody was jostling to find a place inside the train. Finally, we managed to get in."<sup>34</sup> According to Aguiar close to a million and a quarter Hindus and Sikhs migrated from Pakistan to India between August–November 1947. For a train compartment meant for hundreds, roughly 5000 were squeezed in, and one-third relegated to the roof.<sup>35</sup> Trains, in the aftermath of Partition and newly independent nation-states of India, were also scarred by the violence of Partition and looting, killings and gender-based sexual violence targeting women. Literary and cinematic representations on Partition draw our attention to this violence. According to Aguiar, the train came to symbolise communal identities. The direction of the train's movement signified the train's identity as Hindu/Muslim train. The "abstraction produced by mobility" also facilitated this violence.<sup>36</sup> Trains from being vehicles of modernity and as a possible site of mixing were overshadowed by a communal character. Trains are and were not apolitical forms of transportation. Since colonial times it has been used as a site of protest and resistance in the form of protests at various sites of railway construction by railway workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>37</sup> to looting of Government money at Kakori by revolutionaries to a temporal standardisation of "railway time" in colonial period.<sup>38</sup> In the colonial period, railways were used to control labour, life of colonies through the introduction of railway time, and most importantly, it played an essential role in transforming industrial labour. Railways have been a site of political claims, counterclaims, and resistance between the state and citizens.

The politics of claim making in post-Independent India is deeply interlinked with trains– from dedicated Railway Budget presentation at the Parliament by the Ministry of Railways to speculations about an increase in number of trains or extensions on specific routes in the constituencies of railway ministers to retaining a fine balance between the dual purpose of railways as a commercially successful venture and public good. Alongside, citizens in post-Independent India have repeatedly used halting of trains as a method of protest. "*Rail roko*" has been one of the popular forms of protest from colonial times to postcolonial times. Mitchell comments that rail roko and ticketless travel in long-distance trains are ways to understand "how railway spaces are utilized for political communications" and the distinctions offered by a railway official between

violent, nonviolent forms of protest on railway tracks or railway stations give us a glimpse of how these protests are perceived as legitimate and illegitimate.<sup>39</sup> Political practices of rail roko especially in anti-colonial protests to postcolonial protests show how, in democratic citizenship politics, railways are an essential machinery through which citizens negotiate, contest, and challenge the benevolent despotic state. The synonymity of specific state infrastructures with governance, especially railways and buses, is critical to understanding Indian democracy and governance. Bear's ethnographic account of railway bureaucracy and its categorisation of Anglo-Indian workers as "railway caste" also shows the failure of "promised form of modernity" that railways promised. Instead, railway bureaucracy "generated distinctions of community, nation, caste, respectability and race" that Bear unpacks through an ethnography of Anglo-Indian families of Kharagpur one of the well-known railway towns of India.<sup>40</sup> History of railways was also about labour management<sup>41</sup> and a long history of labour movement including period strikes demanding better working conditions in colonial and postcolonial India.<sup>42</sup>

In post-Independent India, railways were envisioned as both a commercial and public utility service. Suburban train networks have played an essential role in daily commuting from rural, semi-urban, and urban to urban areas across India. The city of Mumbai, Kolkata cannot be perceived without the suburban, circular, and metro rail networks. Mumbai Suburban Railways popularly known as Mumbai local trains, has been the subject of many discussions on gendered mobility, safe passage, and the right to travel. Similarly, the urban life of Kolkata would be unimaginable without the Eastern and Southern Railway suburban railway connectivity that is central to the lifeline of the metros. Delhi and other metros across India are connected through the suburban railway network, critical to urbanisation. There is a dedicated Indian Ministry of Railways, and the Railway Minister has been a coveted position in the Cabinet portfolio because of the railways' significance in generating employment and ensuring safe mobility. This is evident in the accusation and cynicism of Mullick regarding the location of the Integrated Coach Factory in Perambur, Chennai.<sup>43</sup> Despite the additional costs that railways would incur to transport raw materials from Bihar and West Bengal to Chennai Mullick feels the choice of Perambur might have had to do with the Railway Ministers. Railway stations, connectivity, and fare hikes are some of the pressing populist concerns that each railway minister tried to address in their railway budgets and yet in my preliminary reading of the budget speeches there is little or no mention of the migrant workers. However the concerns about the affordability of train tickets, travelling with dignity, improving the seats etc., continue to figure in the Railway Budget speeches especially of the Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav a stark contrast to the present move to increase the number of air-conditioned coaches compared to non-air-conditioned coaches known as Sleeper Coaches

or Unreserved Coaches. Yet when India announced its lockdown in March 2020, the entire world woke up to horrifying images of migrant workers taking on National Highways, bus stations and railway stations, hoping to make it to the last bus, train to reach home. Eight weeks later, the Ministry of Home Affairs, in an order dated May 1, 2020, announced the introduction of Shramik Special Trains. Even though the train was named as *Shramik* the notification clearly stated that “migrant workers, pilgrims, tourist, students and other persons stranded at different places” could avail of the trains. On May 2, 2020, the Ministry of Railways came up with guidelines that quite explicitly stated that migrants travel from far-off places to urban or semi-urban centres. It read that each of these trains would be single-destination-bound and a nonstop train. The guidelines also made it clear that each train will cover more than 500 kilometres. Both originating state and destination state had to follow Covid-19 related protocols while facilitating this journey. Each train would have 24 coaches and to maintain social distancing 54 passengers per coach were allowed instead of 72 passengers. As per newspaper reports states could “collect fares from passengers cleared to travel in these trains. The fare includes the price of regular Sleeper class tickets plus superfast charges of Rs.30 and an additional charge of Rs.20. The railways ministry has said that state governments can pay the fare on passengers’ behalf.”<sup>44</sup>

Simpreet Singh, in a map of Shramik Special Trains that left Mumbai, observes that the destination of these trains was a clear indicator of the place of origin of internal migrants. Singh reports that according to the Government of Maharashtra, around 426 trains left various stations in Maharashtra and reportedly transported 600,000 people from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, Lokmanyatilak Terminus in Kurla, Bandra, and Borivali Terminus. According to Singh, “more than half of the passengers (373,287) and an equal proportion of trains (245) that left from Mumbai headed to Uttar Pradesh. About one-fifth of the passengers (131,283) and one-fifth of the trains (86) had Bihar as their destination.”<sup>45</sup> In a Lok Sabha debate in September 2020, the Railway Ministry reported that 97 people had died on Shramik trains, and post-mortem reports indicate prior ailments.<sup>46</sup> According to news reports in June 2021, more than 8,700 people died on railway tracks, of which many were migrants. The Railway Board revealed this data in response to a query posed by a Right to Information Activist from Madhya Pradesh, Chandra Sekhar Gaur. The Railway Board reported that 8,733 persons died on railway tracks between January 2020 and December 2020.<sup>47</sup> While the fatalities on railway tracks in 2020 were far lesser compared to previous years, many of these deaths also coincided with the first phase and second phases of the lockdown, which lasted between March 25, 2020, and April 14, 2020 which was further extended till May 3, 2020. Visuals of migrants walking on railway tracks widely circulated across print and visual media. And on May 8, 2020, sixteen migrant labourers from Madhya Pradesh were run over

on railway tracks in Maharashtra. Fourteen of them reportedly died on the spot and two of them sustained injuries. They were trying to walk to Bhuswal to board Shramik Special Trains bound for Madhya Pradesh. They had already walked a distance of 40 kilometres and probably had slept on the tracks due to exhaustion. According to newspaper reports, they used the road to Badnapur and then switched to railway tracks.<sup>48</sup> Commenting on migrant workers' deaths on railway tracks, a Railway Board official observed that probably the migrant workers preferred railway tracks as these were considered shorter than highways. These deaths were also classified as deaths due to "trespassing" rather than "railway accidents."<sup>49</sup> Irrespective of the classificatory terms of the Indian Railways, we see a clear need to revisit the relationship between the machine of postcolonial modernity and India's internal migrant workers. The lessons from the pandemic informed the inquiry and research question of this research report. I wanted to understand how migrant workers experience journeys. Journeys, as I propose to show, are the bridge between the place of origin and work, between home and destination/s and between homes. How does the migrant worker view the train, station, time spent to reach the railway station, wait for the train, reach the destination, and distance between the destination station and place of work? A study of relevance, meaning of trains, and train networks in the lives of India's migrant workers will be critical to the understanding *bhaichara*, travelling with dignity that compel people to take complex journeys.

### **Field and Fieldwork**

On June 2, 2023, the horrifying accident of three trains in Balasore, Odisha claimed more than 200 lives. The *Business Today* carried a newspaper report with the headline "‘He was going to Chennai’: 23-year-old migrant worker leaves behind distraught family after Odisha train tragedy." The newspaper report stated that twenty migrant workers from Maldah in West Bengal were travelling to Chennai for employment.<sup>50</sup> As we reached Kurla station on June 4, 2023, to board our return train to Patna, many passengers were sleeping, resting on the station premises because their trains had been delayed. Constant announcements of trains and display boards showed trains running late on the South Eastern Railway. The *New Indian Express* report clearly stated that this train was carrying migrants from Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha to Chennai. The report claims that "Director (migration) of Aide et Action International Umi Daniel said Coromandel Express is referred to as a 'migrant train' as it carries an informal workforce from east to south India in large numbers."<sup>51</sup> The *Times of India* carried an editorial piece on June 6, 2023, citing the Government of India's annual economic survey of 2017 which had used "the unreserved railway travel as a proxy for economic migration between 2011 and 2016 and concluded that annual average inter-state migration was close to nine million, way more than what the census had

captured...Buried in that dataset was another message: trains have a bigger impact than what's conventionally measured.”<sup>52</sup>

Taking cue from this, I would not be quick to qualify trains as “migrant trains” because I feel such categorisation absolves the state of the responsibility to safeguard the rights of migrants across train routes and also precludes certain destinations as given while scholarship on migration studies have systematically shown emergence of new destinations. Railway stations are not the final destinations and are a critical nodal point in migrant journeys—they are sites of transit in the journeys migrant workers undertake for “destination” and “home”. Also railway journeys as the *Economic Survey* data revealed that new magnet centres especially in southern India have emerged as destination alongside National Capital Region, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Gujarat has systematically attracted migrants and this became evident in the number of Shramik trains that left Gujarat during the lockdown followed by Maharashtra. The framework of migrant corridors and a long distance train that covered at least two states known for out migration figures were two important factors that contributed to choosing a train from Bhagalpur and Mumbai. The role of Indian Railways in the history of mobility cannot be understood without looking at a site that connects migrants from Bihar to several parts of India. Bhagalpur railway station is well connected with both old destinations such as the National Capital Region as well as Bengaluru and the western part of India. Bhagalpur is one of the important railway towns and the rich socio-cultural historiography, especially with trade, silk trade, and education makes it an interesting site of transit to study its role as a place of origin in the lives of migrant workers.

**Table 1: Arrangement of Train Compartments of Lokmanyatilak Express Popularly Known as LTT [Train Number 12335: Bhagalpur to Lokmanyatilak Terminus; 12236: Lokmanyatilak Terminus to Bhagalpur]**

Engine	Brake Luggage Cum Generator	Second Seating (Unreserved; Two) D 3 and D4	AC 2 tier (A 1, A2)	AC 3 tier (B 1, B2)	Sleeper Compartments S 1–S10 (Extra compartments are added during peak season)	Second Seating (Unreserved; Two) D1, D2	Brake Luggage cum Generator	Engine
--------	-----------------------------	---	---------------------	---------------------	--	---	-----------------------------	--------

This report is based on the following migrant workers on Lokmanyatilak Express, a train that covers a distance of 1911 kilometres over 32 hours and 50 minutes. It halts at 35 stations in the three states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh (with higher rates of outmigration), and several places in Maharashtra, excluding the two arrival and destination stations of Bhagalpur and Lokmanya Tilak station, also known as Kurla. I have followed migrant workers as a co-traveller in Sleeper Class compartments along with my research assistants Akhilesh Raj and Saba Parveen. This report is based on recce visit in December 2023, five onward and five return journeys from Bhagalpur to Mumbai and Mumbai to Bhagalpur between March—covering two peak/rush hour

travel post the festival of colors/Holi and after Eid and the holiday season of May and June when schools across India announce summer holidays. I adopted the method of co-travelling in Sleeper Class compartment along with two research assistants whose social rootedness in Jharkhand and Bihar has helped me in many ways to establish a relationship with respondents. Usually, we tried to book tickets at least four to eight weeks prior to the journey through the online portal and on one occasion we had Waitlisted (WL) ticket and on two occasions we had Reservation against Cancellation (RAC) which ensures a shared berth. The e-tickets, as we quickly learned, leads to automatic cancellation of waitlisted tickets. We have resorted to buying Tatkal tickets (these tickets can be bought two days in advance over the counter or online during designated hours) in cases of emergency. In peak season, we have resorted to breaking up a single journey into two segments to avail of confirmed tickets. In most cases we booked our tickets through the dedicated web portal in advance and at least on two occasions we travelled on shared berths as our tickets were not confirmed and we managed to obtain a shared berth through RAC ticket. At the surface level, online booking has eased the booking process. It has replaced standing in the queue, filling the form and carrying the cash to buy the ticket. However, there lies a caveat. In the case of e-tickets, especially for those tickets which are marked as WL an acronym used for waiting, if passengers continue to be on the waitlist after first charting is prepared and the user/passenger's tickets will automatically be cancelled and the passenger will receive the refund without any cancellation charges. As per Indian Railways guidelines anyone can make advance reservations before 120 days. Indian Railways also has a provision for emergency booking called Tatkal which can be booked in designated hours of the day through the web portal or in person over the ticket counters. Yet, as I will go on to show in the subsequent section, finding a ticket on LTT–Bhagalpur remains one of the basic problems for migrant workers on this route. Most migrant workers sharing this problem also cautioned us to buy paper tickets from the counter if our tickets do not get confirmed. We were advised to buy paper tickets from the reservation counter. Passengers can travel with paper tickets bought from the reservation counter marked as waitlisted. I return to this discussion in the subsequent section. Our entry point to the study was self-identification of passengers as *pravasi mazdoor* (migrant worker). Post pandemic there were several schemes aimed at the welfare of the migrant worker. Very early on in December 2023 we realised that self-identification of migrant worker is critical to understand how the travellers and co-passenger perceives himself/herself and themselves as a migrant worker. At what juncture do they feel at ease to be identified, and adopt this labelling as a migrant worker? What does it mean to claim the identity of *pravasi mazdoor* especially as a first-time migrant to a migrant worker traveling to a new destination in search of paid work that need not complement his skill set? What are ways in which *pravasi mazdoor* claims

his right to safe passage in railways? Our conversations ranged from the experience of train journey with special focus on overcrowding, difficulties in obtaining a reserved ticket, stench from washrooms, and overcrowding, to understanding why people prefer this train, if there are other trains on this route, to their memories associated with the train. This report is based on observation as a co-traveller, interviews conducted with 50 male interlocutors who identified themselves as pravasi mazdoor.

## Of Time and Speed

I woke up to a heated exchange of words between a man standing and a woman sitting on a bag and resting her elbow on my berth number 79—the last side lower berth before the entry and exit doors of the Sleeper coach S9 of Lokmanyatilak Express. This bi-weekly train connects Bhagalpur, in the western state of Bihar, to Mumbai, Maharashtra, in the Western part of India. This time, the



**Figure 3:** Interlocutors getting ready to deboard the train at Kalyan Junction—an important transit station for further journeys.

train was overcrowded as migrant workers and families were returning to their place of work in Mumbai after celebrating Holi. After several unsuccessful attempts to get confirmed tickets, we secured tatkal tickets a day before at Bhagalpur. Until the morning of March 13, 2023, we were unsure if we could make it to the train. We boarded the train at 8.30 a.m. at Bhagalpur railway station. Fifteen minutes into the train, we realised that one of our berths (upper) was occupied by two passengers with relatively no luggage. I was about to ask them to leave when a fellow passenger commented, “this becomes like a local train till Patna.” A fellow passenger, in jest, added, “consider yourself lucky if you manage to hold onto your berth.” This premonition, indeed, was

true. The analogy “like a local train” connotes two everyday realities. One is the entry of passengers who commute to the office, school, or college popularly clubbed under the taxonomy office goers and second is the halting of the train in undesignated stations or railway tracks just before reaching Junction Stations. Most of the commuters who jostle their way try to squeeze in the seats meant for people with reserved tickets. Among them the young and agile enters the compartment and



**Figure 4:** Shoes are often placed on fans inside Sleeper coaches especially by daily commuters.

swiftly removes the shoes to occupy a spot in the upper berth. The iron cage around the fans becomes makeshift places to keep shoes, bags. The side upper and upper berths are taken over by these “daily passengers” and during peak season, specially post festivities families visiting or returning to their places of work or home join this crowd, making the journey unbearable with people across genders forced to stand in close proximity leaving no room to move, let alone some space for smooth movement. Any movement in these spaces require forcible contact with bodies, removal of one to ensure space for another. Yet, food vendors selling sweets to spicy mix of puffed rice make their way through this crowd to sell food items. People make room, buy food and eat. During such peak seasons the personnel from Railway Protection Force (RPF) are deployed at stations to deter local commuters from boarding overcrowded compartments. At least on three occasions I saw them trying to prevent local commuters from entering an already overcrowded compartment. In festive seasons, overcrowding becomes an added risk as families travel with luggage which ranges from trolley bags to gunny sacks of agricultural produce. Apart from human bodies that jostle to find a place it is a common sight for people to carry these heavy pieces of pieces of luggage on their shoulders to avoid overcrowding. The designated time as indicates of halting at stations is mostly 2 minutes barring few stations where the train halts for 5 minutes to





Figure 5: The inner workings of a compartment, © Author.



Figure 6: Blue drums used to store water in urban neighbourhoods with limited water connection are used for storing goods purchased for households. These are repurposed to seat in absence of a reserved seat.

10 minutes and yet the wave of passengers that continued to enter the compartment was astonishing [Table. 2]. The question we need to ask: Why people enter these compartments? What allows them to enter? We received two sets of responses. Female commuters felt express trains were safer compared to local trains. Second, commuters travelling shorter distances opt for these trains as they are faster. When I quizzed families about why they were forcing their way into the compartment despite knowing it was overcrowded one of them replied: “This is *superfast*. We will reach our homes by afternoon, for lunch.” As soon as the train slowed down or halted outside of railway stations, passengers started comparing the train to *bailgari* (bullock cart).

**Table 2: Long Distance and Local Commuters Boarding Designated Time of Halt between Stations for Lokmanyatilak Train (Select Destination between Bhagalpur to Patna)**

Name of Station	Type of passengers boarding stations	Departure	Halt Time*
Bhagalpur	Local + Long distance commuters	8.55 a.m.	
Sultanganj	Long distance passengers		2 minutes
Bariarpur	Long distance passengers		2 minutes
Jamalpur Jn	Local commuters + Long Distance passengers		5 minutes
Abhaipur	Local commuters + Long Distance passengers		2 minutes
Kajra	Long distance passengers		2 minutes
Kiul Jn	Local commuters + Long distance passengers		5 minutes
Luckeesarai Jn	Local commuters + Long Distance passengers		2 minutes
Mokammah	Local commuters + Long Distance Passengers/ Local commuters deboard		2 minutes
Barh	_____		2 minutes
Bakhtiarpur	Local commuters + Long Distance Commuters		2 minutes
Khusropur	Local commuters		2 minutes
Fatuha	_____		2 minutes
Patna Saheb	Local commuters deboard		2 minutes
Patna Junction	Local commuters deboard	1.55 p.m.	10 minutes

**Source:** Data about departure and halt time sourced from erail.in, <https://erail.in/trains-between-stations/bhagalpur-BGP/mumbai-central-BCT?train=12335>, accessed on December 2, 2023, and field work

Approximately around 2:00 p.m. when the train rolled into Patna station and those of us on confirmed seats were just about to rest our tired feet, another wave of people came in. Ticket Collectors themselves found it difficult to make it through the crowds. When the crowd eased up, I asked one of the Ticket Collectors about the quantum of people who might have travelled in the compartment that could accommodate 80 people. He said, “at least 500!” A fellow passenger assured us that the crowd would decrease when we reached Deen Dayal Upadhyay Station (or previously what used to be called Mughalsarai) in Uttar Pradesh. It worsened. The scenario was better since morning. At least one could spot the fellow passengers who were seated and standing on the other side of the passageway. Six people occupied the lower berths on each side, and the upper berth had a minimum of five people. Somehow, my two research assistants and I managed to have our packaged meals for dinner and occupied our designated berth—a side lower, a middle berth, and an upper berth. As soon as he pulled out the middle berth, a young migrant worker in his 20s whom we had interviewed negotiated with me about sharing his berth. His friend, who was in his early 20s, had gotten into an altercation with a hawker earlier, and he had asked him to share

a seat with us during the day. He asked me if I would mind if he continued to sit on the lower berth when I slept. I agreed. When I woke to the heated exchange, two other women were sitting around my leg facing the passage, and one of them was talking to a woman sitting and nursing her baby, who could be a few months old.

As I tried to navigate to get up and request the man and woman to lower their voices, one of my fellow passengers screamed from the opposite berth that the woman with the child could go to the pantry or air-conditioned compartment. I closed my eyes, hold onto my sling bag, and waited for the night to pass. The next morning when I woke up, I realised the woman sitting on her bag had found a spot to sit and the man who was trying to find a spot last night was sitting in the same place as her. He had left enough room in that tiny passageway for the hawkers and other passengers. The moment I woke up, I realised that the two women who were sitting on the edge of the seat had found a spot to rest their backs in a middle berth. I tried to make my way to the washroom to realise I could not find one of my shoes. I borrowed a slipper, and as soon as I tried to make my way to the washroom, I saw rows of backpacks clung to the handles between the passage that connects two railway compartments and somehow found my way through to the washroom and got back to my berth to find three people were sitting leaving a spot for me to sit comfortably. The boy who had “adjusted” a spot with me had moved to another upper berth.

I had a cup of tea and turned to the gentleman sitting next to me to ask if he would be willing to discuss train journeys. He said, “I thought you were only speaking to Bihari migrant workers. I had heard them (pointing to the migrant worker who had found a spot with me in the same berth) boasting that they would be interviewed on the recorder. I was hesitant to ask.” I introduced myself, and the research project and asked him if he would be willing to talk to me about the journeys he has to take to reach his place of work. Another commuter chipped in and commented, “Madame, you have survived one of the worst...One is yet to come”. One of my research assistants said, “she [myself] plans to do a similar journey post-Eid.” I continued with the interview. I learned that the man in his thirties used to work in the loan collection department of a bank in Delhi. Without disclosing the bank’s name, he said he was laid off after being paid a salary for six to seven months when the first phase of the lockdown was announced. He emphasised that he had never faced a problem getting a confirmed seat on a train to Delhi. However, ever since he moved to Maharashtra, he has failed to secure a confirmed ticket. Requesting anonymity, he identified himself as a Hindu and shared that he has started to work as an autorickshaw driver in Mumbai. A hawker tried to make his way and pushed him and he lost his balance. We paused. “No one wants to travel like this. We are forced to....” When I asked him

about other alternative trains, he said, “maybe there are, but I find the timings of this train comfortable.”

Every journey introduced us to multiple reasons for migrating ranging from arranging for dowry to increasing household expenditure to loss of previous jobs etc. However, every migrant worker we interviewed said the trains were never late. “On time” as our interactions and conversations reveal are a relative understanding. If the train ran late between 5 and 15 minutes, passengers would comment, “*Time pe hain* (It is on time),” compared to anything above 30 minutes or an hour. People across genders and ages form the mass of the daily commuters and local passengers. Many young women expressed that despite the overcrowding, their families feel safer if they board such superfast trains than local trains. It must be observed that this overcrowding reaches peak levels during the festive season. During one such festive season, between Bhagalpur to Patna, at least seven people occupied the side lower berth meant for 2–3<sup>53</sup> passengers, and the upper berth had another six people. In total, thirteen of us huddled and sat in the heat of March 2023. One of the hawkers was trying to push his way into the compartment and a young boy of 18 years resisted. He was travelling with two other boys. The hawker forced his way and tried to assault him, we asked him to sit with us. Overhearing his voice, a woman screamed from a distance and asked, “What happened?” The young boy and his friend responded, “wait there, there is no place here, don’t come here.” To save him from the really angry hawker, I removed my leg and gestured for him to sit. He sat down and seeing my diary where I was scribbling a small map he chuckled and asked about my work. I asked him if he was a regular on this train. He said, “Yes.” Pointing to two of his young friends, he shared that three of them work in a car garage. When I asked him if the woman was related to him, he said, “she is his mother and pointed to a sea of people.” I assumed he meant one of the boys. When I asked him if she was joining her son in Mumbai or visiting him, he replied, “she is going to collect her son’s belongings.” By then, we reached a station when another friend of his peeped from the window and asked if I was a journalist. I said, “No.” As soon as the train left the station, he made his way stood next to the corridor and told me that in case they didn’t find a seat for his mother, his mother could sit at the edge of the seat in the night. Akhilesh, my associate suggested they should book a spot between the two lower berths and find a spot for her to sleep. They agreed and we returned to the conversation of his brother’s death. Like him, his brother worked in Mumbai. He was in his early 20s. He used to work in a factory. He had a family in village and had fallen in love with someone in Mumbai. The reason for his suicide remains unknown. His brother and their friends guessed this could be one of the reasons. The owner insisted he wanted to meet the mother to return belongings and offer monetary compensation. Since they heard the news, they waited for fifteen

days to arrange tickets to get his mother. When he had to share the news at home he commented he had difficulties. He said that his “brother has a family. I told them accident. There was an accident in the factory’. The mother reeling from the shock of her firstborn’s death constantly came up to ask her son to sit far away from the door. The son kept on fighting back saying, “I am sitting here because of the breeze.” The mother kept reprimanding him not to peep outside since “there is an electric pole outside...these young men! They have to live to feel the breeze, no! One has gone, now this....” The mother told us that her eldest son was responsible, left home for work, established himself, and never delayed sending money home. She mourned her death and also lamented that “now all the responsibility will be on him (pointing to the son who was talking to us). We will manage. He has more mouths to feed.” The son asked his mother for food and took her to another direction. He apologised and said, “I don’t want to spoil my mood. I love trains. We listened to music, and then he called his other friend who by then had found a place in the upper berth.” Akhilesh decided to move to the upper berth and interview him. He told Akhilesh that this was his last visit to Mumbai. He has learned the work and he has made arrangements to run a garage. He told me if the business was not profitable he could sell groceries or do something else. But he did not wish to return to Mumbai. It was his last journey as a migrant worker.

He and his friend concurred that they liked to sit on the footsteps of the train door: “You can feel the breeze, the cool...the speed.” Does the speed overtake the stench of the washroom? I asked. To which others joined in and said, “There is only one way to feel the speed and not feel the stench,” and he signalled at some boys smoking. Some people who struggled to find a seat in the empty passages and found refuge in washrooms agreed that they were willing to endure this difficulty because they had faith and trust in the speed of the train and that the train would reach on time. One said, “We put up with this because it will save us time.” Starting with the commuters who force their way through to board the train for shorter distances between Bhagalpur to Patna, daily commuters especially returning from work from Ara onwards, and workers, to families who travel on waitlisted tickets, workers who travel on reservation against cancellation, waitlisted tickets and unreserved tickets and pay a fine all agree that there is no better train on this route which will ensure that you reach your destination on time. For the local commuters between Bhagalpur and Patna it meant reaching Patna by afternoon, for office commuters this coincided with their return from workplace and for migrant workers the train was preparing them for another duration of work before they returned home. Most workers, especially those returning to work, reported that sometimes, if situations allow, they preferred to take a day’s rest before joining work. Many workers prefer boarding the train on Friday, reaching Lokmanya Tilak Terminus on Saturday, and taking a day off before joining their respective workplaces. Some

workers who would have to undertake another 4–6 hours or even 12 hours journey from Manmad Junction or Kalyan Junction reported that this allows them to reach their workplaces by Sunday at the latest. Apart from Friday, the train is operational on Tuesdays and Sundays. Most workers felt that the volume of people travelling due to the festive season or during “normal times” would benefit if the train becomes a daily instead of tri-weekly. A group of workers who boarded the train from Kiul from the neighbouring state of Jharkhand also reminded me that road connectivity, and rail connectivity to stopover stations are one of the important reasons why many people prefer this train. One of them asked me to open the Google map on my phone and check the distance between Jamui and Kiul. I showed him my phone screen. “See it takes the same time, roughly half an hour to reach Kiul by train as well.” He further commented that when you take equal time to reach a place by train or road, that is development, and development for people.

*Sadak* (road), *Bijli* (electricity), and *Pani* (water) marked a significant transformation of India’s developmental agenda, paving way for urbanisation, rural-urban transformation, and most importantly, modernisation and industrialisation. As an emblem of modernity and a symbol of progress, trains came with the promise of connectivity, reduced time, and increased speed. The Indian Railways brands itself as a “Lifeline to the Nation.”<sup>54</sup> The e-books available on the web portal of Indian Railways carry two phrases as taglines of Indian Railways: “Speed of Railway, Speed of Nation.” The books emphasize the electrification of the railways, and the recent obsession with reducing time and increasing speed is evident in the Indian Railways’ rush to introduce Bullet Trains and air-conditioned vista dome coaches for a burgeoning aspirational middle-class India. Private operator-run trains like Tejas are a reflection of how Indian Railways envisions its journey as the lifeline of the nation, with more emphasis on speed and the upgradation of facilities targeting India’s middle class, who are potential customers of low-budget airlines. The significance of railways, railway station specially the status of a junction or a zonal division continues to dominate how railway towns become significant and synonymous with urbanisation. Bear’s work on Kharagpur, a railway town in West Bengal, clearly shows the segregation integral to maintaining the hierarchy and status of railway bureaucracy.<sup>55</sup>

One of the passengers pointing to the newly introduced facilities and cleanliness of railway stations directs me to the newly introduced drinking water facilities and starts telling me of ancillary trading connected to railway journeys. “You must understand that the stoppage time between stations is 1 min or less than 2 min. So many people board and also deboard the trains. Some with massive amounts of luggage. Some people also deboard at stations when they must fetch drinking water and food. In earlier days, before the arrival of long distance trains the hawkers would ensure that the taps meant for drinking water would not work. Some screw/spring would

be left loose. Moment passengers would realise there was no water, they would be forced to buy plastic bottles.” Recounting this experience, passengers said it all happened so fast and before they would understand what had happened, they had to be back on the train. Similarly, on many occasions passengers sitting next to the window would be forced to pay for food items that would be thrust on their laps from the gaps between the window rails. One of them said, “The moment a train would roll into a station, I would try to be cautious of thieves who might steal bags, of hawkers who might force food and then expect to pay up. These things don’t happen now. Robbing, stealing is a thing of the past.” Many migrant workers told me how they travelled without tickets and would quickly change compartments in a whiff to avoid Ticket Collectors. One of them remembering a chase told me, “I was young. I quickly boarded a running train and the TT missed his train.” The risks people undertake to travel on time are enormous. Yet the promise of a speedy journey is what lures everyone to board LTT be it the daily passengers comprising of a cross section of middle class government employees, college and university going students and families during peak seasons to migrant workers who travel in teams of two, three or four against one reserved berth for the hope of a better life and better livelihood. Speed and on time are the hallmark of this train and is completely in sync with the colonial modernity of the Imperial Rule of British Empire. The disappointment and hope are expressed in phrases “like bullock cart,” “again it slowed down,” “now this train will slow down,” “it will catch up in the morning,” “what speed?” “we will reach on time,” also shows the significance of railways in shifting the notions of time from local mean time to Presidency time to debates around whether Madras time (also used for Telegraph can be adopted for railway time) can be adopted for standardising “railway time” and finally agreeing to Greenwich as base meridian as “Railway time” which to this date continues as the Indian Standard Time.<sup>56</sup> In 1905, the British Empire adopted the Greenwich as base meridian and it has taken over our notion of time and speed.

Bhagalpur Lokmanyatilak Express as most of the migrant workers agreed was almost always on time. However on many occasions the train slows down post Kalyan and at times it can be late by 1–3 hours. Speed is integral to travelling with dignity. Many of the interlocutors remind me of the critical moment of the introduction of Garib Rath. Literally meaning Chariot for the Poor, this train was rolled out under the former Minister of Railways Lulu Prasad Yadav whose name cropped up in many conversations of how the state can think of improving railways for migrant workers. Many workers reminded me of the landmark Garib Rath express which aimed at charging a nominal fare for people to travel in air-conditioned coaches in normal times. One of the workers reminded me, “can you tell me of one train after Garib Rath that is meant for us to travel with *izzat* (dignity and honour)? To travel in a bit of comfort? Now you have fancy air-



conditioned coaches. Ensure there are more Unreserved coaches. Increase the number of berths. Should I tell more? Who is going to listen?”

### **“Ticket Ban Gaya”: Have You Made Your Ticket?**

Prasad’s extensive discussion on “third-class travel” is useful to understand “elementary logic” of the constant tension between passenger versus freight and who is more profitable to be transported. According to Prasad the East India Company’s Court of Directors in 1845 ruled out the possibility of people of India as its potential passengers. The court suggested that transporting merchandise and livestock would be more profitable than people. Prasad shows that railways attracted people from the very start. In the opening year 1853–54 half a million people travelled across 35 miles of track and by 1911 the passenger traffic increased to 389 million and almost 90 per cent of the passengers travelled in third class and most of them were Indians.<sup>57</sup> Till about early 1900s there were no lavatories in the third class compartments, problem of overcrowding remained a persistent problem and alongside there was a rampant practice of using “insanitary goods wagons to transport people who had paid for third-class travel.”<sup>58</sup> “Overcrowding” as Prasad shows can be traced back to the colonial India and the remedial measures range from not overselling tickets compared to the space, curbing the entry of passengers than beyond capacity, charging passengers for carrying extra luggage. Overcrowding for colonial railway officials was to do with innate Indian-ness however their policies for spacing in carriages meant for *baboos* were rather different. “Baboos need carriages with seats to keep clothes clean” concluded one railway administrator in a conference on railway stock in 1871.<sup>59</sup> Prasad also shows that railway companies repeatedly denied that they were selling more tickets than the space available on trains. Has the scenario changed?

In contemporary long-distance travel and ticketing policies for Sleeper coaches and Unreserved coaches allow a passenger to buy a paper ticket from a booking counter at a railway station to board the train. Most of my interlocutors depending on their budget either bought a ticket for Bhaglapur–Mumbai for Unreserved coach and paid a fine at the spot or they bought a ticket for Sleeper coach and travelled on a waitlisted ticket. In my travels I have not come across any incident of any worker who identified himself as a *pravasi mazdoor* who was travelling without any paper ticket. While most of them complained that they could not get confirmed tickets with a berth and each one of my 50 interlocutors entered into various adjustments to travel. Some of them they bought a paper ticket and travelled with someone who had a reserved tickets and shared a berth. Some paid a fine and made room for themselves in between the floors of the passageways in the trains. They told me of occasions when they travelled without a ticket and had to suffer

harassment. Scholars on migration on several occasions has hinted at the relevance of studying sales of unreserved tickets as a testimony to India's internal migration. A *Times of India* Editorial written in June 2023 reminded us that long distance trains as the Economic Survey of 2017 showed offers an important site to make sense of the new destinations and the volume of internal migration which was not captured in the Census. The editorial observed that the Economic Survey relied on the data of "the unreserved railway travel as a proxy for economic migration between 2011 and 2016 and concluded that annual average inter-state migration was close to nine million, way more than what the census had captured." The editorial further observed that "Buried in that dataset was another message: trains have a bigger impact than what's conventionally measured". This editorial was published right after the tragedy when three trains collided in the Eastern state of Odisha claiming 200 lives. This was 2 June 2023. Newspaper articles started pouring in about how families lost their only breadwinner as one of the trains as a well known NGO official remarks in a newspaper report categorised Chennai bound Coromandel Express as a Migrant Train. The train was a lifeline for migrants from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha to Chennai. As per one of the reports, 20 people from Maldah district of West Bengal were onboard and suffered the tragedy. When I stared at the numbers, I could not help but think of the people who do not feature in the reservation chart because many passengers buy paper ticket at the railway station and then pay fine to travel. It could take months to collate from the fine slip the names. On June 4, 2023, we reached Kurla station in Mumbai and the station premises was busier than usual. People were waiting around with bags as the trains bound for southern states of India were running late. We were discussing about how migrants travel and the number of people who will remain unaccounted for in this tragedy. One of the migrant workers who was waiting for Lokmanya LTT Express overhearing our conversation pitched in and said, "and then many a times we don't even say to our families which train we are boarding. Suppose this was a peak season, Diwali, we will try to force our way through any train that is bound for Bihar. Once we board, then maybe we will try to figure out what kind of train it is because, accordingly we will pay a fine." Apart from passageways, bathrooms, spaces connecting two compartments, pantry cars and entrance passages around air-conditioned coaches are some of the places they try to fit in. They also told me that many a times they pull down shutters between air-conditioned coaches during peak season. The volume of passengers on every route is increasing and migrant workers struggle to find a reserved berth in a train or a spot to rest their backs on trains in their journeys are a reminder of the challenges that continue. Most workers responding to the Ticket Collectors call, "Is your ticket done?" tell me how railway authorities should reduce the number of days for advanced booking.



**Figure 7:** Passengers often use their bags (in this case Backpacks) to reserve a spot on empty berths for seating. The number of backpacks signify the potential number of occupants in a seat meant for 1 or two in case the seat is allocated to someone on RAC (Reservation against Cancellation)

One of them shared with me that they “have to travel on short notice. Till we receive the bonus we can’t make arrangements to travel back. For instance the date of Diwali, Holi or Eid may be fixed but we make a decision to return to our families on the basis of whether or not we have money.” Returning home after Holi with newly wedded wife one of the workers who identified himself as an Ansari tells me that his *Seth* (implying the employer) gives a generous bonus in Diwali and in Eid. “However given that he works in the garment sector it is impossible to leave the machine given the surge of orders.” Another worker who specialises in embroidery remarked, “see I decided to travel back in Eid after I received my bonus. Until Seth receives money where will he give a bonus? I travel from Mumbai to Uttar Pradesh, I have a number of train options but why I am travelling on this train (pointing to his co-traveller who is from a village in Bihar he went on) he has a reserved ticket. He paid Rs.4,000 to get a tatkal ticket. He has a berth. So three of us joined him as it is difficult to find a spot for luggage if you don’t have a confirmed berth.” Pointing to the space below the side lower berth where I was sitting he remarked, “Can I keep a sack?” A fellow passenger who had already made arrangements to seat through the day and sit on the edge of the seat in the night remarked, “I have already told her that I will keep the luggage.” He pointed

to a bag kept on the edge of a upper berth and said, “For now I have adjusted on that brother’s upper berth. He is travelling with another three passengers so they will need space to seat. In the night I have to remove the bag so that there is space for all of them.” The price of a Sleeper class ticket from Bhagalpur to Mumbai on Sleeper Class is Rs.725 but most of the passengers who decide to accompany someone who has a waitlisted or RAC ticket has two options either to stand in a queue and pay Rs.725 to buy a paper ticket. However, as one of the workers returning from Bhagalpur after Eid pointed out that the queues are so long that people at times have to spend one night or two nights in stations. This feeling was echoed by several autorickshaw drivers in and around Kurla Station in Mumbai who suggested that we should visit Kalyan and Manmad and just observe how people wait around the stations so that they can buy a ticket and head back home. Explaining to me the economics of travel one of the workers asked me to show my ticket. “See you booked the ticket one month in advance and spent Rs.725 plus online booking charges. Look at my tickets, this is my general ticket Rs.415, and then I have to pay a fine of Rs.510.” He showed me the slip where the Ticket Collector had charged a fare of Rs.260 and excess fare Rs.250. For a single journey many workers like him are forced to pay Rs.925 to pay for safe passage without a berth. Pointing at my reserved berth he commented, “you get to seat, I don’t. I have to sit on the edge, stand up and constantly move around before someone takes pity on me.”

**Table 3: Price of a Ticket a Migrant Worker has to Pay**

Sl.	Class of Travel	Prices of Ticket between Bhagalpur-Mumbai (INR)	Type of Ticket on which a Migrant Worker Travels	Price Paid by Migrant Worker (INR)
1.	2A	2,800	—	—
	2 A Tatkal	2,885	—	—
2.	3 A	2,000	—	—
	3 A Tatkal	2,420	—	—
3.	Sleeper	725	—	—
	Sleeper Tatkal	765	Pre-purchased Confirmed ticket General Ticket+Fine	765  925
4.	General	410	General	410

**Source:** Original price fare, erail.in, <https://erail.in/train-fare/12335>, and based on field observations

Overhearing the conversation another worker told, “we pay to travel. We are not travelling for free but look at us. People on their berths are actually paying less compared to us who think of us as nuisance.” Some people have made peace with this scenario and travel back once a year. Mohammad Ajad, 23-years-old tells me that fifteen days ago when he returned home he spotted “five to six people were sitting and even sleeping inside the bathroom. Some people sat outside the bathroom. There was nobody coming to clean the toilet.” I told him I had observed a similar experience during Holi when I saw a mother and child occupying the washroom because there

was no place to sit. He told me of several occasions where he has seen people sitting, eating, drinking and sleeping in the bathroom. One of the workers chipped in and remarked, “Madam bathroom becomes a berth in itself.” Mohammad Ajad tells me that he always travels on a confirmed ticket and tries to return home once a year especially during Eid. He books his tickets in advance so that there is no problem. Many workers who have bought tatkal tickets tell me that it is difficult to walk in and buy a ticket. There are agents who stand in the queue hours before the counter opens. One of them remarked, “now you get tatkal tickets online. But I don’t know how to do.” Many workers who travel between Bhagalpur-Mumbai and Mumbai-Bhagalpur have resorted to buying tatkal tickets during peak festivities specially Holi and Eid after paying Rs.4,000 per ticket. Another worker on condition of anonymity who worked in a powerloom in Bhiwandi told me that before it would be possible to get a confirmed ticket at least a month before. He prefers this train as this is a direct train and it ensures that he will reach his workplace by early evening. He has to board a bus from Kalyan and it takes him forty minutes. He prefers eating his food all by himself. In recent times he has started being careful. Most workers carry food from homes. The most preferred food is fried flatbreads and boiled and tossed gram with onions and



**Figure 8:** Boiled green chana—one of the foods sold by local vendors on trains

chillies. In summer, many migrant workers prefer sticking to cucumbers and fruits which they buy on platforms. One of the major expenses during summer is water. Despite water filters in stations most workers prefer buying bottled water. On an average, a worker has to spend a minimum of Rs.60–80 for water on a single journey. When I tried finding out from a vendor about the number of water bottles he has sells, he told me that he had almost sold 300 water bottles. The vendors from IRCTC carry chilled water bottles stacked in a circle in an aluminium bucket and make their way through the compartments amidst the overcrowding. Most workers in summer end up spending more money in summer compared to winter because they have to buy food

and water. As one of them say, “in summer I can get food packed for one time. Food goes bad.” The most preferred food on the journey is boiled gram. One worker acknowledged that apart from the ticket a worker spends around Rs.600–700 on a single journey. A worker totalling up the expenses on his journey commented, “we need at least Rs.1,500 on a single journey.” The question of who pays for the journey is important and varies. For seasonal labourers the contractor pays for the passage and deducts it from the wages received. For workers in powerlooms or garment

factories they receive a travel allowance once a year. However as one worker who received such an allowance said, “see my Seth will pay for the price written on the ticket but I bought the ticket through a tatkal agent. So who will pay for that?”

### **Lessons from Journey**

What do we learn from the struggles of the migrant journeys? Pravasi mazdoor’s paradoxical rights of safe passage are claimed through two axes: one of speed and the other through paper tickets. Despite the overcrowding the migrant workers prefer the Lokmanya Tilak train because it is on time and it reaches fast. By linking speed and time and comparing the slowing of train to that of a bullock cart migrant workers narratives are a constant reminder of the promise of modernity that railway networks were supposed to usher in. As emblems of modernity, train networks and train journeys as Ritika Prasad’s reading or mine shows that railways are spaces of segregation as evident in the constant struggle to claim basic facilities. The choice of “certain” express trains over others shows how migrant workers resist, challenge the state who otherwise have used railway timetable to discipline travelling bodies through introduction of standard time. The endurance of migrant workers and their insistence on availing a crowded train shows the need to bring in studies of journeys as central to migration scholarship through a deeper introspection of what kind of infrastructures of travel are India’s migrant workers undertaking to travel to work as a first time migrant, seasonal migrant labour, temporary and permanent migration. Each of these categories have fuelled a range of transportation networks ranging from contracted bus from places of origin to places of work, to *sirdars* organising travel of migrant workers, to independent travel. Migrant Journeys also provide an entry point to study transportation network of India and the role of state in controlling prices, reservation and basic rights of travel. Migrant journeys of Bhagalpur to Mumbai and Mumbai to Bhagalpur shows how railway stations places of transit and first point of contact with city’s infrastructure. An infrastructure that treats the migrant workers as peripheral to the city. An infrastructure that reminds the migrant that Mumbai is the *maya nagari* or the dream city. Migrant journeys provides a reverse reading of the lifeline of the nation— Indian Railways. It shows how class character of Indian Railways has undergone a transition with liberalisation, introduction of cheaper air travel and most importantly the introduction of hi-speed trains, AC vista dome coaches or facilities in air-conditioned coaches is a reminder of how middle class like the Baboo travellers in Ritika Prasad’s work need more space and comfort. Travelling with dignity without having to stand, find a spot in the passageway between the seats or bathrooms or corridors meant for walking is a reminder of how “bodily practices—that sustain movement.”<sup>60</sup> Walters, Hellers and Pezzani argues that bodily practices are central to understanding locomotion. They

argue that compared to migration and mobility locomotion brings forth the “intimate connection between moving and physical mechanisms” and it is precisely this intimate connection that we see in migrant journeys in a Sleeper coach of a train that brings migrant workers of three states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh to Maharashtra.<sup>61</sup>

Migrant Journeys in Sleeper Class of trains provides us a glimpse of what “migration assemblage” looks like. It is as much a reading of changing spatiality of Sleeper Class compartment as well as the placemaking by the migrant worker where “s/he” resists and defies the spatiality offered by the railways. It is through occupying the empty spaces in between seats, toilets, edges of reserved berths they emplace themselves and rightfully adjust to sleep, to eat, to rest. It is in their bodily actions of occupying that trains emerge as sites of viapolitics. I have made a modest attempt to reconstruct “the events of flight and mobility” on a train route to show how migrant workers occupy Sleeper Class compartments by embracing speed and paying fine and travelling and resists the categorisation of “unreserved travel” by contributing to earnings of Indian Railways from “unreserved travel.” By paying for unreserved travel migrant workers create a rupture, a break, in the linear understanding of reserved and unreserved travel. Their journeys as unreserved travellers also iterate Samaddar’s claims about “real time” belonging to “the bourgeois management of human mobility.”<sup>62</sup> Samaddar builds upon Walter Benjamin’s notion of “homogenous empty time—a time connected to the standardized global regime of control and discipline, the transmogrified time belongs to freedom and decolonization.”<sup>63</sup> Time and choice of vehicles go hand in hand. It is in the choice and routes of vehicles that migrant workers become appendages to “real time.”

---

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> IRCTC is the acronym for Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation, is a Central Public enterprise under the Ministry of Railways that runs the catering on the train and railway stations and is also responsible for e-ticketing and travel packages for domestic and international tourists.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Railways, “Women Compartments in Trains,” Press Information Bureau, Government of India, December 27, 2017, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1514319>.

<sup>3</sup> Sakshi Kumari, “Indian Railways Passenger Friendly Services You Must Know About,” Railmitra, July 22, 2023, <https://www.railmitra.com/blog/indian-railways-passengers-friendly-services-you-must-know-about>.

<sup>4</sup> Uday Chandra, “Janu. Sister-Supervisor of Migrant Construction Workers,” in *Bombay Brokers*, ed. Lisa Björkman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 102, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478013082-009>.

<sup>5</sup> Supurna Banerjee, “From ‘Plantation Workers’ to ‘Naukrani’ The Changing Labor Discourses of Migrant Workers,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 13, no. 2 (July 2018): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973174118785269>.

<sup>6</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, *Migration in India 2020-2021*, Periodic Labour Force Survey July 2020- June 2021 (Delhi: National Statistical Office), 15, [https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/Migration%20in%20India%20R16082023.pdf](https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Migration%20in%20India%20R16082023.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Indrani Mazumdar, N. Neetha, and Indu Agnihotri, “Migration and Gender in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 10 (March 9, 2013): 55 (54-64)

<sup>8</sup> Amrita Datta, *Migration and Development in India. The Bihar Experience* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2023), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Datta, *Migration and Development in India*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Datta, *Migration and Development in India*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Datta, *Migration and Development in India*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Amrita Datta and S.K. Mishra, “Glimpses of Women’s Lives in Rural Bihar: Impact of Male Migration,” *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 54, no. 3 (2011): 457–77; Miranda Das, “Male Out-Migration and Women in Rural Bihar: A Socio-Legal Study,” *Journal of Migration Affairs* 1, no. 1 (September 2018): 21–40, <https://doi.org/10.36931/jma.2018.1.1.21-40>; H. de Hass and A. van Rooij, “Migration as Emancipation? The Impact of Internal and International Migration on the Position of Women Left Behind in Rural Morocco,” *Oxford Development Studies* 38, no. 1 (February 2010): 43-62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600810903551603>.

<sup>13</sup> Pushpendra Kumar and Manish K. Jha, “From Kosi to Delhi. Life and Labour of the Migrants,” in *Migrants and the Neoliberal City*, ed. Ranabir Samaddar (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2018), 313.

<sup>14</sup> Kumar, and Jha, “From Kosi to Delhi,” 315.

<sup>15</sup> Das, “Male Out-Migration,” 28.

<sup>16</sup> Datta, *Migration and Development in India*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Datta, *Migration and Development in India*, 60–2.

<sup>18</sup> Kumar and Jha, “From Kosi to Delhi,” 317.

<sup>19</sup> Kumar and Jha, “From Kosi to Delhi,” 317.

<sup>20</sup> Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity. India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 5.



- 
- <sup>22</sup> Daniel Thorner, "The Pattern of Railway Development in India," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1955): 201–16.
- <sup>23</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 5; Thorner, "The Pattern of Railway Development in India," 203.
- <sup>24</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 11.
- <sup>25</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 73.
- <sup>26</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 87.
- <sup>27</sup> Ishita Dey, "On the Margins of Protection: Cooper's Camp, Nadia," in *Citizens, Non-Citizens, and in the Camp Lives, Policies and Practices* 21, 2009, 25–53, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/pp21.pdf>.
- <sup>28</sup> Anwesha Sengupta, "The Railway Refugees Sealdah, 1950s–1960s," *Occasional Paper 57* (Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, March 2017), 10, 13, <https://idsk.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/OP-57.pdf.pdf>.
- <sup>29</sup> Sengupta, "The Railway Refugees Sealdah," 14.
- <sup>30</sup> Anwesha Sengupta, "Bengal Partition Refugees at Sealdah Railway Station," *South Asia Research* 42, no. 1 (2022): 40–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02627280211054807>.
- <sup>31</sup> Sengupta, "Bengal Partition Refugees," 41.
- <sup>32</sup> Sengupta, "Bengal Partition Refugees," 46.
- <sup>33</sup> Sengupta, "Bengal Partition Refugees," 49.
- <sup>34</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Narrated Time and Constructed Space: Remembering the Communal Violence of 1950 in Hooghly," in *Women in Indian Borderlands*, eds. Paula Banerjee and Anasua Basu Raychaudhury (London and New Delhi: SAGE, 2011), 56.
- <sup>35</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 74.
- <sup>36</sup> Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, 85.
- <sup>37</sup> Ian J. Kerr, "Working Class Protest in 19th Century India: Example of Railway Workers," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 4 (January 26, 1985): 34–40.
- <sup>38</sup> Ritika Prasad, "'Time-Sense': Railways and Temporality in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (2013): 1252–82.
- <sup>39</sup> Lisa Mitchell, "The Railways and the City in the History of Indian Political Practice," in *The City and the Railway in the World from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, eds. Ralf Roth and Paul Van Heesvelde (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 229–41.
- <sup>40</sup> Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation, Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy and the Intimate Historical Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 157–79, 191–225.
- <sup>41</sup> Ian J. Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- <sup>42</sup> Kerr, "Working Class Protest."; Ranabir Samaddar, *The Crisis of 1974: Railway Strike and the Rank and File* (Delhi: Primus, 2016); Nitin Sinha, "Entering the Black Hole: Between 'Mini-England' and 'Smell-Like Rotten Potato' the Railway-Workshop Town of Jamalpur, 1860s–1940s," *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 3 (June 2012): 317–47.
- <sup>43</sup> Reba Mullick, "Railways and the First Five Year Plan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 6, no. 43–44 (October 1954): 1189–1200.
- <sup>44</sup> "54 Passengers Per Coach, Non-stop Run: All You Need to Know about 'Shramik Express' Trains," *Hindustan Times*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/54-passengers-per-coach-non-stop-run-all-you-need-to-know-about-shramik-express-trains/story-WZqYPHBYXQCCF4G753N3O.html>.

---

<sup>45</sup> Simpreet Singh, “This Map Shows where Mumbai’s Migrant Workers Headed after Trains Finally Started Again,” *Scroll*, August 7, 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/969350/this-map-shows-where-mumbais-migrant-workers-headed-after-trains-finally-started-again>.

<sup>46</sup> “97 Died in Shramik Special Trains Run during Lockdown,” *Times of India*, September 17, 2020, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/78158405.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/78158405.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

<sup>47</sup> “Covid-19 India Timeline: Looking Back at Pandemic-Induced Lockdown and How the Country is Coping with the Crisis,” NDTV, June 2, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/railways-8-700-people-died-on-tracks-in-2020-despite-reduced-passenger-train-services-2454739>.

<sup>48</sup> “Aurangabad Train Accident: 16 Migrant Workers Run Over, Probe Ordered,” *The Indian Express*, May 8, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-lockdown-maharashtra-aurangabad-migrant-workers-killed-train-6399556/>.

<sup>49</sup> “Over 8,700 People Died on Tracks in 2020 Lockdown—Many of them were Migrants,” *The Indian Express*, June 2, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/over-8700-people-died-on-tracks-in-2020-lockdown-many-of-them-were-migrants-7341473/>.

<sup>50</sup> “He was going to Chennai’: 23-year-old migrant worker leaves behind distraught family after Odisha train tragedy,” *Business Today*, June 3, 2023, <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/trends/story/he-was-going-to-chennai-23-year-old-migrant-worker-leaves-behind-distraught-family-after-odisha-train-tragedy-384091-2023-06-03>.

<sup>51</sup> Diana Sahu, “Odisha Train Crash: Injured Migrant Workers Stare at Uncertain Future,” *The New Indian Express*, last updated on June 10, 2023, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/odisha/2023/Jun/10/odisha-train-crash-injured-migrant-workers-stare-at-uncertain-future-2583707.html>.

<sup>52</sup> “Migrants’ Ride: Long-Distance Trains like Coromandel Express are Especially Vital, They Carry Millions Travelling for Jobs,” *Times of India*, June 6, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/migrants-ride-long-distance-trains-like-coromandel-express-are-especially-vital-they-carry-millions-travelling-for-jobs/?source=app&frmapp=yes>.

<sup>53</sup> At times two people on Reservation against Cancellation (RAC) tickets are allocated a shared berth. Side Upper and Side Lower Berth are meant for two persons but at times two people can share a berth especially if they have a RAC ticket.

<sup>54</sup> “Indian Railways: Home Page,” Indian Railways, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://indianrailways.gov.in/#>.

<sup>55</sup> Bear, *Lines of the Nation*, 4–13, 63–9.

<sup>56</sup> Prasad, “‘Time-sense’,” 1256–67.

<sup>57</sup> Ritika Prasad, *Tracks of Change. Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India*. (Delhi : Cambridge University Press, 2015), 23–4.

<sup>58</sup> Prasad, *Tracks of Change*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> Prasad, *Tracks of Change*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani, *Viapolitics: Borders, Migration and the Power of Locomotion* (Duke University Press, 2022), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Walters, Heller, and Pezzani, *Viapolitics*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, “For the Migrant, the Way is the Life,” in *Viapolitics*, eds. Walters, Heller, and Pezzani, 282.

<sup>63</sup> Samaddar, “For the Migrant,” 282.



Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen  
Institute for Human Sciences



## **Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group**

IA - 48, Ground Floor, Sector -III, Salt Lake City  
Kolkata 700 097, West Bengal, INDIA