

Expansion of Railways and Its Impact in the Princely State Mayurbhanj, Odisha: A Historical Review

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Abstract

The paper tries to find out the political agenda of Britishers in the context of the expansion of railways in Orissa generally and the princely state of Mayurbhanj particularly. However, it critically looks into the extension of the railway and its impact on people, forests, trade and commerce, and so on. In connection to this, special attention is given to the role of timber contractors or agencies that fulfill the colonial government's demand for railway sleepers in the princely state of Mayurbhanj. As Mayurbhanj is the largest tribal belt in Orissa and rich in forest as well as natural resources, an attempt is made to critically analyse the relation between the raja and the Britisher and their approaches towards forest ecology. Here, the author used several secondary sources in the form of vernacular newspapers, reports, books, and articles with the qualitative and historical research approach and draw the conclusion.

Keywords: Princely state, railway, ecology, timber

Introduction

The introduction of railway lines in India was a necessity of the colonial administration. The revolt of 1857 taught the British the danger of isolation due to the want of facilities for communication, which were practically non-existent throughout the country. For that, a tremendous impetus was given to railway construction.¹ But the question was which type of

material (iron vs wood) would be used for manufacturing railway sleepers? Berkeley, the Chief Engineer of the Great Indian Peninsula railway (GIPR), argued in favour of the use of wood for cost effectiveness and financial advantage. He estimated that the cost for an iron sleeper road for 1 mile of a durable line was 2,154.7 pounds, whereas the cost of wooden sleepers was 1,408.18 pounds. The iron sleeper would cost the Company 745.9 pounds per mile more than the wooden sleepers laid on the road with the 84 lbs. rail and 4 ft. bearings.² So the cost factor and availability of timber in India were the major factors in deciding in favour of wooden sleepers. For that, the expansion of the railway has a great impact of the forest and its people.

Railway lines in Orissa

With the force of time and the needs of the British Empire, the government acquiesced and delegated the construction of the railway line in Orissa to the Bengal Nagpur company (hereafter BNR) in 1887. The Company built several railway sections in different places in Orissa. These railway sections are mentioned in table 1.

Table.1

Date of Opening of different Railway Sections in Orissa		
Lines	Date of Opening	Mileage (in miles)
Cuttack- Bhubaneswar	01.02.1897	10.32
Bhubaneswar-Khurda Road	20.07.1896	11.76
Khurdha road- Rambha	01.03.1896	61.54
Rambha –Berhampur Ganjam	01.09.1895	29.56
Berhampur Ganjam- Palasa	01.04.1895	45.76

Palasa- Parlakhemundi	17.12.1894	33.11
Parlakhemundi- Vijaynagaram	15.07.1893	37.50
Kharagpur- Balasore	17.12.1898	71.75
Balasore- Cuttack	10.01.1899	116.76

Source: Nayak (eds.), The Railways in Colonial South Asia: Economy, Ecology and Culture, 2021, p.441

The table.1 mentioned several railway lines with the mileage. The first railway line was built from Parlakhemundi (modern Gajapati district) to Vijayanagaram of 33.11 miles and the highest mileage was the line from Balasore to Cuttack in 1899.

Bengal Nagpur Railway (BNR)

The BNR got the charge to construct railway lines in Orissa. The chairman was Robert Miller, and Sir T. R. Wynns was the Managing Director. The company was registered on 23 February 1887. There were several lines comprised under the BNR system. These are discussed in table 2.

Table.2

Lines	Miles
Bengal Nagpur railway proper (5' 6" gauge)	2030.47
East Coast Railway, Northern section (5' 6" gauge)	321.60
Anuppur-Chirimiri (5' 6" gauge)	53.84
Mayurbhanj Light Railway (2' 6" gauge)	70.64
Parlakimedi Light Railway (2' 6" gauge)	56.30

Purulia-Ranchi Branch (2' 6" gauge)	116.54
Raipur-Dhamtari Branch (2' 6" gauge)	56.94
Satpura Railway (2' 6" gauge)	625.92
Tumsar-Tirodi Light Railway (2' 0 gauge)	Line dismantled on 15.02.1936

(Source: History of Indian Railways Constructed and in Progress, Shimla, 1906, p. 21)

The table 2 discussed the several railway lines constructed by the BNR. The Bengal Nagpur railway proper was the longest at 2030.47 miles whereas the Anuppur-Chirimiri railway line was 53.84 miles.

Railways in Mayurbhanj

The railway age dawned in Orissa by the closing years of the nineteenth century when the first train from Khurdha to Bhubaneswar was flagged off on 20 July 1896.³ During that time, the Mayurbhanj State Light Railway was worked by the BNR by virtue of the contract entered into between the Chief on the one side and the agent to the BNR on the other. Mr. Manson was the agent of BNR.⁴ The first railway line in Mayurbhanj State was built from Baripada to Rupsa in 1905⁵ and 36 miles from Baripada Road Station to Baripada Garh on 1 April 1905.⁶ Simultaneously, the extension of the railway line from Baripada to Talbandh was sanctioned by the Government of India under their notification no. 261 dated 14 September 1915. The length of the new construction line from Baripada to Talbandh is 38.69, and the length of the existing line from Rupsa to Baripada is 32.41 miles. The total length is 71.10 miles on the 2' 6" gauge. During the year, the Mayurbhanj Railway Company was formed, and Messrs Hoare Millar & Co., of Calcutta were the managing agents. The state had granted certain concessions to the

railway company. These were (a) free grant of land (b) free grant of ballast and stone for building purposes, and (c) free carriage of construction material over the existing railway.⁷

There were several railway stations lying within the district of Mayurbhanj. These were Bahalda Road, Anlajori Junction, Gorumahisani, Rairangpur, Kuldiha and Badampahar on the broad gauge and Thakurtota, Jugpura, Jugal, Betnoti, Krushnachandrapur, Jamsore, Baripada, Bhanjpur, Kuchai, Budamara, Rajaluka, Bangiriposi, and Talbandh on the narrow-gauge line.

Results and Discussion

Impact of Railways: Development or Deforestation

Due to the Forest Act of 1865, 1878, and 1927, the forests were broadly divided into reserved and protected forests, through which the British controlled the forest according to their needs and interests. The Act has also promoted the expansion of railways in the colonial period, in which the lower class people, especially the indigenous people who lived in or near the forest areas, became the ultimate sufferers. The traditional rights were curtailed, so the villagers regarded state forestry as an incursion not sanctioned by custom or precedent.⁸ In the forests leased by the British, where the raja in princely states had no control, the people became the slaves of the Forest Department, the lowest ranger or patrol having more power for good and evil than the raja and all his councilors. As a loyal Chief, the Mayurbhanj raja had to introduce the Draconian law of expulsion to keep his state peaceful.⁹ The situation was the same in the case of the Ganjam district in Orissa. The Ganjam administration in the nineteenth century was often hard put to prevent the spread of local tribal discontent to the contiguous tribal tracts of Vizagapatam and Jeypore, as also to tribal tracts in the Chhatisgarh feudatory states and those under the Bengal Presidency.¹⁰

The expansion of the railway line had created a space for Baripada, the headquarters of Mayurbhanj, to access the Howrah-Madras main line. The distance was about 50 kilometers. It gave an opportunity to traders of Calcutta to take advantage, who rushed into the virgin market of Mayurbhanj. A Large number of Marwari and Gujarati traders arrived at Baripada as contractors and traders. Among the articles of general merchandise, the principal commodities carried by the railway during the second half of the year (July to December 195) were rice 856 tons, salt 288 tons, and fire-wood 262 tons.¹¹

In the Bamanghatti Sub-Division Rairangpur is the most important centre of trade. The market of Rairangpur was a place to attract the neighbouring British districts of Singhbhum and Midnapore and the Perganah Dhalbhum. Bahalda and Tiring place were exporting the *sabai* ropes in some quantity. The contemplated railway to Gurumaaishani Hill was expected to have a tremendous impetus to trade in this Sub-Division.

In the Panchpir Sub-Division the centres of trade were at Jashipore, Karanjia, and Roruan, where up-country merchants have established shops. The principal articles exported from Mayurbhanj were agricultural and forest products, including tassar and lac, and hide. The articles imported were principally salt, tobacco, and betel, apart from articles of European manufacture. It was in contemplation to tap this area by a main road connecting Baripada with Jashipore in the Panchpir Sub-Division and to throw open its mineral and forest resources for exploitation.¹²

Another effect of the opening of the railway was the rise of the price of rice due to the large influx of traders in different parts of India. The price was more than 50 per cent in comparison to the previous year. The rice fetched almost the same price either at the town of Baripada or at a

village near the railway line. Simultaneously, the flourishing cart traffic between Baripada and Balasore has become almost extinct.¹³

Mayurbhanj was rich with Iron ore at Badampahar, Garumohisani, and Suleipat. The quantity and quality of the deposit were surveyed by Pramath Nath Bose, an eminent Geologist, and leased out to the Tata Iron and Steel Company.¹⁴ The railway line provided the impetus to the Company to exploit the natural resources, which had a great impact on the tribes in Mayurbhanj. They thought that clearing of forests for the railways would infuriate the ancestors buried under the forest land. As a result, the tribal people feared that instead of rains, fireballs would drop from heaven.¹⁵ The impact was much deeper and more destructive when the officers of Messrs. Tata Sons & Co. of Bombay were making surveys and clearing jungles for the construction of buildings and erection of plants for working the iron ores in Gurumahisani, which had a great impact on ecology.¹⁶

The forest was exploited by several timber contractors/agencies in the early nineteenth century.¹⁷ There were more than 26 timber contractors who were involved in cutting the trees mostly for railway sleepers. They were Messrs B. T. Co. Ltd., Babu Ram Lal Mandal, Messrs K. N. Himatsingha & Co. Ltd., Messrs Ramjilal Sohanlal & Co Ltd., Babu J. C. Kumar, Babu N. N. Kumar, Mr D.D. Chaterjee, Mr D. N. Dutta, Mr P. N. Hui, Mr S. K. Bose, Mr S. Lal, Mr Hirji Kana, Mr. H. P. Roy, Mr K. M. Das, and Rajaram Bhakat Ram. Mostly, the timbers were cut in the Similipal range of Mayurbhanj and transported to the local Badampahar railway station. Later, the timbers were exported to the outside of the State.¹⁸

Conclusion

The expansion of railways in India was the hegemonic nature of colonial government. Though the railway lines provide several facilities to the colonial officials, they have a deeper impact on the ecology as well as the people of the land. The condition was the same in the case of the princely state Mayurbhanj. Though the princely state was ruled by the raja, the ultimate authority was the British government. In this context, the raja was involved in the process of exploitation of natural resources. For instance, the raja in the early 1880s even offered to provide sleepers from his forests without royalty for 125 km of permanent way if a railway line was constructed between Bengal and Puri.¹⁹ The expansion of the railway was also responsible for the deforestation and ecological imbalance in colonial India. Especially, the income of the state was tripled between 1890-91 and 1910-11 because the revenue came from the exploitation of the *sal* forest in the Similipal range. The necessity of timber for railway sleepers is acknowledged; yet, the careless and wasteful methods of timber extraction raise concerns over exploitation.

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