

The Train Nation: the Railway as a Leitmotif in South Asian Literature

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As a product and a reminder of British rule in India, the railways represented a Western, non-traditional and destructive hold over the country for Mahatma Gandhi. In *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, he vehemently denounces the railways as spreaders of the bubonic plague, famine and general roguery. He also attributes to them the power to induce malevolence and desecrate holy places when he says, 'They accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very great difficulty.'¹ However, it is because of the railway's rapidity that Gandhi was able to tour the entire country of India and visit the remote villages that had been connected to each other and to towns and cities by the railway, thereby getting his message to millions more people. What emerges is that Gandhi was principally opposed to the complete industrialization of the country where, he felt, machines would take over from humans and lead to unemployment, laziness and dependence. He withdraws some of his resentment towards the railways when he states, 'What I object to, is the *craze* for machinery, not machinery as such.'²

When 'the reader' in *Hind Swaraj* suggests that the disadvantages of the railways are outbalanced by the fact that they have produced 'a new spirit of nationalism', Gandhi ardently disagrees and points out that it was the British

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. by Anthony J. Parel, (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p.47.

² *Ibid.*, p.166.

who instilled this idea in the Indian people that they were not one nation prior to colonisation. He proclaims,

*We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently they divided us.*³

In light of this statement, Gandhi rejects the notion that railways somehow produced the Indian nation or a national identity, but rather believes that a sense of national identity predates the introduction of the railways.

This is a contentious issue since it is often disputed whether the railway in India is capable of building a nation or indeed whether there was a nation in existence prior to imperial rule at all. Numerous people disagree with Gandhi and argue that railways are responsible for the making of a nation. For example, in *Railways in Modern India*, Ian J. Kerr insists that 'Railways made the Indian state and hence the Indian nation possible'⁴ for the reason that they knitted people and colonies together. This is a claim that Richard Cronin in *Imagining India* supports and voices the irony of;

*Dalhousie planned the railways to tighten British rule of India, to make it more efficient. But the trains had one effect that Dalhousie surely did not foresee. They made possible the birth of the idea that was finally to put an end to the Raj, the idea that India was a nation.*⁵

Cronin ascribes this to the ability of the railway to join the 'inward-looking' life of the villages to the worldly life of the cities and the whole country. So, by leaving their sheltered and insular abodes via the train, villagers experienced the greater world outside and consequently felt that they really belonged to a nation.⁶ In his work, *Exploring Indian Railways*, Bill Aitken takes up this thread when he praises the railway in India for being

³ Ibid., p.48.

⁴ Ian J. Kerr, ed., *Railways in Modern India* (Delhi; Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.56.

⁵ Richard Cronin, *Imagining India* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.77.

⁶ Ibid., p.76.

truly national and for being able to overcome 'the greatest single problem facing the nation – the negative inertia of the past.'⁷ This, he claims, is due to the fact that the railways in India give structure and a vital functioning order to society and thereby, 'maintain a semblance of order and continuity' amidst the apparent chaos, even in the aftermath of such an atrocity as Partition.⁸

Not only is it thought that the railway in India provides a structure for society and acts as a breeding ground for the nation, it is also considered to be wholly representative of the nation in a way that the villages are often thought to be. When people talk of seeing the 'real India', they imply a truth and purity which is not tarnished by outside or Western influences. The villages were regarded as being emblematic of this because they were not modernized or affected in the way that the towns or cities were – they depicted the real 'Indianness' of the nation. Paul Theroux in his travel narrative, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, indicates why the railway has taken over this capacity:

*To understand the real India, the Indians say, you must go to the villages. But that is not strictly true, because Indians have carried their villages to the railway stations. [...] The village in rural India tells the visitor very little [...] The life of the village, its interior, is denied to him. But the station village is all interior.*⁹

The 'interior' Theroux mentions is analogous to the nation, since it is a space reserved for those who comprise it and belong to it, and such a private sphere is accessible at the railway station. V.S. Naipaul is in agreement with this, when he states that the railways 'reveal more than that 'real' India which Indians believe can only be found in third-class carriages', but unsurprisingly Naipaul does not necessarily view this as a positive exposure; 'They reveal India as futility and limitless pain, India as an idea'.¹⁰ Despite this pessimism, the underlying truth, I would argue, is that the railway emerges as a reflection

⁷ Bill Aitken, *Exploring Indian Railways* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p.246.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.247.

⁹ Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar* (London: Penguin, 1977), p.114.

¹⁰ V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Picador, 2002), p.238.

of the nation, whether it creates a nation or not is debatable, but a distinct and strong relationship is irrefutable. It is then imperative to establish how exactly the nation is defined, how it is formed and what it means, in order to fully understand the position of the railway as its microcosm.

Of the many definitions of the nation by various critical thinkers, a recurrent belief is that the nation is a mental construct. Benedict Anderson's description of the nation as an 'imagined community' is particularly relevant to this. He claims that the nation is imagined because one will never know or meet most of the people within the nation but nevertheless one is aware of the existence of a sovereign and limited community to which they belong.¹¹ This idea of community is also prevalent in Ernest Renan's essay "What is a Nation?", when he cites one of the most necessary factors for the survival of a nation as being the sacrifices and sufferings endured by the individual for the sake of the collective and the solidarity that results from this. Moreover, Renan is also in agreement with Anderson that the nation is not a concrete entity and that it is not determined by such scientific or material factors as geography, race or language for example, instead, 'A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.'¹²

The concept that the nation is something spiritual is of great significance to Partha Chatterjee, specifically in relation to Asian and African nations. In his work, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Chatterjee speaks of two domains within society; a material or outer domain where the West has dominance over the East, and a spiritual or inner domain, in which cultural identity and spirituality originate. Colonialism is kept out of the spiritual domain by the sovereignty of the nationalism that is in control there. Even more importantly, it is in this spiritual realm that the nation is born:

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p.6.

¹² Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?", in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.19.

*If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power.*¹³

Furthermore, Chatterjee contends that Indian nationalism, which is often considered to be a derivative of a European phenomenon¹⁴, is in fact something that is produced in the inner spiritual world of India. This definition of the nation and nationalism as a spiritually constructed or imagined entity is a pertinent one. Though some have claimed that its origins are European, it is the intention of this paper to regard the Indian nation as an Indian construct informed by the people who conceive it, in the same way as the railway in South Asia, despite its imperial roots, is a South Asian phenomenon. This is the case because the railway has been fully adopted into the hearts and minds of the people and thus has been transformed from a British machine into a wholly South Asian symbol. However, this parallel between the railway and the nation does not account for Gandhi's insistence that the railway plays no role in the formation of the nation; in fact it is Gandhi who is widely accepted as achieving this. Often referred to as the 'father of the nation', he is largely regarded as providing 'for the first time in Indian politics an ideological basis for including the *whole people* within the political nation.'¹⁵ Even Jawaharlal Nehru commends Gandhi's ability to 'restore the spiritual unity of the people' and calls him 'the symbol of India's independence and militant nationalism'.¹⁶

The intrinsic link between Gandhi and the nation in India cannot be disputed, insofar as this man was a very significant factor in the development of the nation and of nationalism in India, without him it is debatable whether

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999), p.6.

¹⁴ For instance, Elie Kedourie claims that nationalism as a doctrine is a wholly European export in his book *Nationalism*, as does Benedict Anderson in "The Origins of National Consciousness" in *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁵ Chatterjee, p.110.

¹⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p.363-4.

the national sentiment in India would be as strong as it is today. On the other hand, the role that the railways of India have played in forming a national unity or identity is less certain for the reason that, though there are many claims, there is little proof that any national feeling was produced by the railways. As I have previously discussed, Gandhi himself did not like to associate one with the other, whereas others are adamant that the railways were and are a fundamental exponent of the Indian nation and symbolize a national identity in a way that nothing else does.

Perhaps the most revealing source on the railway and the nation in South Asia is in the area of literature. The railway is a frequently employed motif since it has the ability to bring people together as well as separate them and gives a panoramic view of a society and country. Three diverse novels will be explored so as to provide a varied and broad analysis on the topic at hand. The first of these is the novel *Kim* (1901) by Rudyard Kipling, and although this is Indo-Anglian fiction written long before independence, it is important because it looks at the nation whilst under British rule, and from the position of a hybrid child. In this book, Kim and the lama as well as a myriad of other characters travel by train throughout the country, thereby providing a colourful insight into the railway and the state of the nation. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is set in the small border village of Mano Majra in India and has the horrific events of the Partition massacres as its backdrop. This story is informative because it illustrates the significance of the railway in the lives of the Mano Majrans and also the vital though unfortunate part it played during the division of the nation. Lastly, *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry, a diasporic writer, is set against the political unrest of the Emergency government in India in 1975-85. In this novel, the railway is as crucial in the transportation and bringing together of the protagonists, as it is in interpreting and critiquing the national politics of the time.

With respect to these works of fiction, three main areas present themselves for investigation. Firstly, it is valuable to examine the human presence on the railways. The railway and the nation both encapsulate the movement of multitudes who appear fundamentally chaotic in their diversity, yet who move in similar patterns and on the same terrain. A train compartment for instance is home to a whole range of characters and throws a miscellany of people together without regard for their tastes or preferences. It is in this situation that Richard Cronin suggests the passenger needs to re-evaluate himself:

*The traveller is a son, or a daughter, a neighbour or a friend, tightly caught in the subtle tissue of family and social relationships in which every Indian is swaddled at birth. As the train pulls away, and he settles back in his seat and looks around him at his travelling companions, he must find a new identity.*¹⁷

This is true for Kim in Rudyard Kipling's novel when he is alone in a railway station waiting-room and begins frantically to question himself and his personal identity. Squatting in the corner of the waiting-room, he asks, 'Who is Kim – Kim –_Kim?'¹⁸ He has to redefine himself and find his place within the larger life of the nation. However, despite the fact that railways in India undoubtedly bring people together, it is true that they also serve to divide. The existence of an intricate class and ticketing system perpetuates caste divisions because it separates the various strata of society. This was of course an important issue for Gandhi, since it was his non-conformity to the class rules of train travel and his subsequent ejection from a train in South Africa in 1893 that incited him to fight back against such racial and class injustice. Thus the train embodies the simultaneous unity and disunity of humankind, which is inherent to the Indian nation.

¹⁷ Cronin, p.79.

¹⁸ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Penguin, 1994, 1st pub. 1901), p.248. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Secondly, the train and the train station emerge as a home to many and in this way they emulate the situation as it is in the nation itself, which despite its alienating capacity is essentially a large home for the masses. The word 'home' conjures up images of comfort, security, nurturing and privacy which appear quite antithetical to what one would commonly find in a railway station. But in spite of this, the station can become a home to people, if we take into account Rosemary Marangoly George's definition of home for example,

*Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place. It is community. Communities are not counter constructions but only extensions of home, providing the same comforts and terrors on a large scale.*¹⁹

Therefore, the station is a home insofar as it is a community that is made up of a number of people who fight for their right to be there and for their space within it, such as the many station dwellers in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. When Om and Ishvar become homeless after the destruction of their shack they turn to the railway station for shelter. There, a carefully established system is in operation involving the rights of the various sleepers, which is overseen by the railway policeman. Om and Ishvar must pay him if they wish to sleep on the platform, that is, they must rent the space just as one would a house or apartment.

Furthermore, Marangoly George asserts that a home does not have to be a concrete geographical entity but is often an imagined construct. Therefore, home becomes an imagined location in a similar way as the nation does according to Benedict Anderson. The nation and the home are both constructed mentally to include oneself as well as a community with whom both the home and nation are shared. The use of such mental faculties is suggestive of what Edward Said explains as the movement from filiation to affiliation; a move away from ties of biology and geography to ones to do

¹⁹ Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p.9.

with culture and society.²⁰ This is evident in the novel *Kim*, since Kim sheds all biological and geographical ties at a young age and is wholly influenced by various cultural encounters. He does not have a home in the traditional sense of the word, as he constantly moves around creating a family as he goes.

One of the main places in which Kim is 'at home' is on the train, the very use of the phrase '*te-rain*' suggests that the train is more than simply a mode of transport to Kim, but rather a place that he can inhabit and be included in.²¹ '*Te-rain*' immediately implies the word 'terrain', which comes from the Latin word 'terra' meaning earth, and thus is associated with nature, and also a kind of stability and permanency. This is not something that a train would normally be likened to, as it is a moving and manmade machine. Yet, the '*te-rain*' in *Kim* seems to be neither unnatural nor unstable to the protagonist; he tells the lama, 'I know the ways of the *te-rain*' (*Kim* 41).

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the relationship between national political turmoil in India and Pakistan and the nation's railways is particularly revealing. As with other features of the nation, such as its inherent simultaneous divisions, separations and inclusions, the politics of the nation throughout history have been manifested in the locale of the railway. Once more this site is emblematic at a more localised level of the events and issues that are in contention on a larger scale in the nation and country. Perhaps the most significant and horrific of these events is that of the Partition in 1947.

The Partition riots in villages and towns, in cities and around borders were responsible for a large portion of the deaths at this time, however it was

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p.23.

²¹ It is important to remember, however, that Kim embodies British colonialism and thereby exerts a certain authority, which means that his inhabiting can be a form of possessing and controlling. Elleke Boehmer states that, 'undeniably he also represents an exuberant high imperial confidence, at once signifying and comprehending all-India', which problematizes Kim's position as an innocent child. [Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: OUP, 1995) p.74.]

the massacres on the trains that remain as the lasting image of the brutalities.

Bill Aitken explains,

*After the refugees on the 35 Up clashed with those on the passing of 36 Down the grisly solution of the pragmatic politicians was to send an equal amount of traffic in either direction to ensure an equitable balance of reprisals.*²²

Thus, the trains became the medium through which the religious and ethnic violence could take form, which gives rise to the stark reality that 'the partition of India and the killings that accompanied it have impressed themselves on the imagination in a single image, as an attack on a train.'²³ Nowhere is the direct correlation between the nation and the railway as apparent as it is in the awful consequences of the Partition and one novel that exemplifies this is Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*.

Before the effects of partition are felt, the sleepy village of Mano Majra is a peaceful and content home to a number of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. The presence of the railway is shown to be the main reason for the existence of this village while it informs the daily pattern of the people's lives. Niaz Zaman observes that 'even as Singh interweaves the lives of the people with the routine of the trains, he also suggests how the separate religious communities co-existed with each other'.²⁴ This co-existence is representative of the relationship of the people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh before partition, and though Singh's novel may depict a somewhat idyllic community of various religions living in harmony, what he succeeds in doing is to underline the extreme divisions that came with partition and how they forcibly tore people apart by virtue of religion. The first chapter of *Train to Pakistan* demonstrates how as a result of the railway Mano Majra transcends all religious and ethnic boundaries; firstly, the mail train on its way to Lahore before daybreak wakens the people of the village, then 'the mullah at the

²² Aitken, p.26.

²³ Cronin, p.84.

²⁴ Niaz Zaman, *A Divided Legacy* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p.35.

mosque knows that it is time for the morning prayer' (*TTP* 12), which in turn induces the priest at the Sikh temple to arise and perform his ablutions and prayers. Later, the midday express tells the villagers that it is time for a siesta, the evening passenger train from Lahore informs them that it is time to go back to work, and finally the goods train lulls them to sleep at night. So, the entire village is regulated and synchronised by the arrivals and departures of trains, regardless of their creed; we are told, 'It had always been so, until the summer of 1947' (*TTP* 14).

Changes on a national level invoke drastic changes in Mano Majra. At first, the train timetables become unreliable, however, it is the total disruption of the train services, complete with ghost trains throughout the night, that throws the village into a disorganised state, and it is the arrival of a unit of Sikh soldiers that signals the major changes that are about to take place in the village. The train from Pakistan that arrives one morning bearing nothing but murdered men, women and children unequivocally alters people's lives. The massacre of a trainload of Hindus and the subsequent mass cremation greatly affects the Mano Majrans and 'That evening for the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, the Imam's sonorous cry did not rise to the heavens to proclaim the glory of God' (*TTP* 100).

The nightmarish scenes of the murdered bodies that Hukum Chand sees reflect what is experienced on a national scale, as does the decision to transfer all Mano Majra Muslims to Pakistan. The train, which once was the instrument of their unification, now serves to divide the inhabitants of the village. Moreover, it becomes a symbol of death, not only because of the incoming ghost trains, but also because these in turn incite violence and revenge in some of the villagers. The second and third train massacres are even more atrocious than the first because the gruesome outcomes are witnessed by the people of Mano Majra and they now know what to expect once they see a train;

'There are no lights on the train.'

'The engine did not whistle.'

'It is like a ghost.'

...There was no doubt in anyone's mind what the train contained.

(*TTP* 163, 166)

When the trainload of Mano Majra Muslims goes through the village on its way to Pakistan, the transformation of the train is complete. From a benign and familiar entity which gave structure to village life, the train is now described as a fiendish force; 'The demon form of the engine with sparks flying from its funnel came up along the track. Its puffing was drowned in the roar of the train itself' (*TTP* 206). Like the nation, the railway has hugely changed as a consequence of political decisions and the majority of people are helpless at the foot of this great power. However, though the train is a symbol of death, there is a glimmer of hope at the end of the novel when Juggut Singh cuts the rope to allow the train a safe passage into Pakistan, thus saving many lives, but sacrificing his own. This example of the single figure losing their life on or in front of a train is a common one in South Asian literature, for instance in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay* and Ruskin Bond's short story 'The Woman on Platform 8'.

It is particularly apparent in *A Fine Balance*, where numerous people meet their end on the railway. Again, as in Singh's novel, the deaths are directly related to the wider political issues of the time, but Mistry's novel is set in the more recent period of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. The novel as a whole gives voice to the people who were maltreated by and suffered horribly because of the government of this era. Slum clearance in the guise of 'beautification' and forced sterilisation are central events in the novel and convey the sheer magnitude of the government's power, but the railways were not exempt from Indira Gandhi's rule. When faced with a nationwide

railway strike in 1974, the Prime Minister dealt with the situation by arresting and incarcerating all the railway union officials, between 20,000 and 50,000 of them.²⁵ Therefore, having such a vast influence and unlimited power, it is understandable that people attribute any disturbance or death to the government as they do in the prologue of *A Fine Balance*. When the train, on which Maneck, Om and Ishvar are travelling, halts unexpectedly and they are told that a body has been found on the tracks, it is normal that someone should remark, 'Maybe it has to do with the Emergency' (AFB 5). But it is another passenger who reveals the true impact of the situation;

Why does everyone have to choose the railway tracks only for dying? [...] Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death – everything ends up delaying the trains. What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives?

(AFB 6)

This complaint exposes an important point, that is, all the injustice and corruption within the government are transferred onto innocent people and are played out on the railways before anywhere else, and moreover these are often unfortunately in the form of death. Some people kill themselves as a way of escaping the horrors of the government and a wish to no longer suffer, others meet their end because they retaliate against these higher powers and fight for the basic rights that they are being denied. The latter, a noble will to stand up against the government is what Maneck's college friend, Avinash, possesses when he sees the corruption of Indira's government, including the suspension of fundamental rights, the arrest of opposition leaders, the imprisonment of union and student leaders, and all of these under the pretext of an 'Emergency' due to threats from the interior. It is a sad blow when Avinash mysteriously falls off a fast train and is found dead on the tracks with no identification on him and torture marks on his body. His opposition

²⁵ Cronin, p.76.

to the government and rallying of the students made him a nuisance, who had to be eradicated.

However, it is Maneck's suicide at the close of the novel that is truly shocking since he is a central character and one who had remained somewhat sheltered from the violence of the time in a way that Om and Ishvar certainly did not. It becomes clear that even if not directly affected throughout the course of the book, Maneck is left to come to terms with the pitiful condition of his friends and thus, must look the malpractices of the Emergency government head on. What happens to his close circle of friends is symptomatic of what happened nationally and Maneck simply cannot handle this and becomes a fatal victim of the national politics. His choice to commit suicide in front of the train ties together the various roles that that railway plays in the novel, from uniting diverse peoples, to acting as a home and shelter for a community and as a machine that can bring death as much as it can provide life. This is poetically phrased in one of Maneck's last thoughts before he jumps to his death in front of the train;

He stared at the rails. How they glinted, like the promise of life itself, stretching endlessly in both directions, silver ribbons skimming over the gravel bed, knitting together the blackened, worn-out wood of the railway ties.

(AFB 611)

In this quote, infinite life, death and the convergence of humanity within these margins are shown to be as natural and straightforward as the existence and interconnectedness of the railway tracks.

The railways in India have emerged as a 'spatial gateway'²⁶ through which the tide of humanity moves, an inclusive and exclusive home of comfort and protection, and an arena for national politics. But through these properties a duality emerges. This is manifest in the simultaneous

²⁶ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (California: University of California Press, 1986), p.174.

protective and destructive qualities of both the nation and the railway, considering that they provide a safe haven and act as a violent and dangerous locale in which political unease or corruption is embodied. Significantly, what underlies each organic property is the possibility for unification in the form of community and solidarity under a collective roof, and at the same time, a diversity which ordains difference and separation at every turn. The nation and the railway speak of and from the margins, which becomes symbolic in overshadowing and at times undermining the established discourse, as is portrayed in many of the novels examined in this paper. Voices from the periphery – the hybrid child in *Kim*, the seemingly negligible characters in *A Fine Balance* and the marginal Mano Majruns in *Train to Pakistan* – who speak on seemingly minor matters, make themselves heard in a way that sheds new light on politics, society and the nation in South Asia. These subaltern voices increasingly illuminate the railway's significance on a larger scale and also externalize wider ramifications than those which merely occur on its '*te-rain*'.