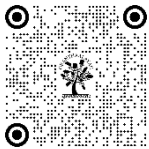


# PRINTED NARRATIVES OF UNREST: A STUDY OF RAILWAY STRIKES IN COLONIAL BENGAL UNTIL 1911

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## ABSTRACT

The labour movement, especially the Railway working class movement in Bengal has a rich history. Prior to the significant "May Day" event in America in May 1886, a movement was initiated by 1200 workers at Howrah Railway Station in Colonial Bengal in May 1862, advocating for an eight-hour workday. This marked the commencement of strikes for the rights of railway workers in Bengal, precipitating a series of revolutionary protests until the annulment of the Partition of Bengal. Economic catastrophe, humiliation, negligence, discrimination, poor working conditions, low wages, etc. forced the working classes to organise all those movements which have been reflected in contemporary literary traditions. This paper is to deal with the strikes organised by the railway workers of colonial Bengal for their rights and how these labor movements have been reflected in contemporary Bengali literary traditions, especially in newspapers at that time.

**Keywords:** Railway Workers, Labour Protest, Labour Rights, Swadeshi Movement, Sway of Nationalism, Contemporary Bengali Newspapers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Permanent settlement, legislation for the loss of land ownership of zamindars and the eviction of peasants from agricultural land, the creation of a floating population, the expansion of foreign trades, mills, and factories, and the abolition of a small range of industries made the situation of the nineteenth century Bengal a plethora of figurative agitation. After the monopoly in trade in Bengal, another step towards the economic extraction and administrative advantages of the British government was the introduction of railways. By building the railways, the aspects of exploitation became more real than the so-called declared well-being of the Indian people. Along with the development of the railway system, there was rapid expansion of industries throughout India, especially in the iron, steel, and fuel industries, which were owned mainly by the British capitalist group. To squeeze profits more, the British capitalist groups were using the cheapest raw materials and labour in India only, which showed their alluring teeth and nails in extortion of the helpless and oppressed working class. The cheapest Indian labourers engaged in British industries contributed to the profit of British capital. But all the workers and porters were deprived of their rights every moment. The working class was compelled to abandon their duties due to the oppression and torture inflicted upon them. The

number of workers was less and had not yet emerged in terms of consciousness and organization at that time. Most workers were employed based on contracts and were not united in terms of wages and attendance. Still, amidst this situation, the railway working class at the time staged an unprecedented coup. In May 1862, 1200 workers went on strike, demanding 8 working hours, and as a consequence of that, throughout the whole colonial period, railway workers showed their dissident faces for their rights, which led them to be organized and more integrated with the vibe of nationalism.

## 2. OBJECTIVES:

1. The nature of the recruitment of railway workers in colonial India will be dealt with in this article.
2. This article deals with the causes and consequences of the struggle of the railway working class in two phases- 1. Railway strikes before the Swadeshi period and 2. Railway Strikes during the Swadeshi period. in brief
3. The role of contemporary newspapers in favouring the demand raised by the Railway workers and how much this has been reflected in contemporary literary traditions of Bengal are the main points which will be dealt with also.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEWS

Regarding the subject of "Strikes by railway workers up to 1911," no such enlightening, informative, or objective discussion has been found. The following works have been done either in a piecemeal manner covering all of India, scattered, or integrated with other related themes.

'*Bharater Dharmaghatar Itihas 1827-1885*' by Basudev Mosel (Moshel, 1958) is a pioneering work that provides the history of Indian strikes. The book discusses the concept of a strike in ancient India, its nature, how strikes are interpreted internationally, the first strike in India and other strikes, the role of the workers in them, the development of their organization, etc. The Railway Workers' Movement, however, is not extensively covered in that book.

The labour issue in India as a whole is covered in length in Gopal Ghosh's '*Bharate Shramik Andolonar Itihas*' (Ghosh, 1967). This book goes into great detail about the evolution of capitalism in India, the emergence of the working class, its rise, its political awakening, the birth of the Factory Act, the rise of the trade union movement, the development of the All India Trade Union Congress, and the impact of the Russian Revolution on the workers of India. Less is spoken about the working class movement in railroads.

Samar Dutta's '*Shramik Samasya O Trade Union Andolon*' (Dutta, 1969) is another excellent work. He divided the labour movement in India into two phases - pre-independence and post-independence. The nature of the labour movement and its history were covered in the first phase, and numerous worker issues, strikes, the development of trade unions, and the emergence of various labour rules, regulations, and laws were covered in the second phase. However, the strikes of railway workers are neglected here.

Sukomal Sen's '*Bharate Shramik Andolonar Itihas 1830-1970*', vol-1 (Sen, 2015) is very important to know the history of the labour movement in India. The Industrial Revolution did not take place in India under colonial rule. Hence, the process of the working class emergence in India during the second half of the nineteenth century was extremely painful and slowed down. This book is the history of this process of emergence and the hard struggle of the working class in colonial India. Therefore, the book discusses the labour movement's relationship to the working class and trade unions within the context of Marxist philosophy, as well as how the ancient Indian economy was destroyed, how democracy spread throughout India, how the working class emerged, and how India's industrialization process has developed. It has been described how the working class in India has been mobilized throughout history and in their protracted battle. The hardship of the long-running railway workers' struggle, however, was not specifically highlighted here, except the Railway strike of 1907.

Gopala Ramanujam, an Indian politician and co-founder of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, lived through the Indian labour movement and witnessed it firsthand. He subsequently published the incredible and informative book '*Indian Labour Movement*' (Ramanujam, 1986) as a result of his experiences. He begins his book by stating that the trade union movement is a byproduct of the industrial revolution. It has been extensively discussed how industrialization began in England, how the British developed their industrialist-capitalist mode in India, and how the Indian subcontinent was embroiled in production-labor conflicts. In this production-labor relationship, it has been briefly discussed how the railway workers began strikes for their rights and made history, as well as how the railwaymen organized themselves to

put forward their demands and rights and fought with the British. Ramanujan describes the function of dominant political parties, the Indian trade union movement, and its growth in a shifting political landscape in the shadow of the Indian Freedom Movement and after Independence Politics. It primarily examines how various trade unions conduct their operations and how they interact with the government and employers through a variety of laws, rules, and commissions. However, the railway strikes up to 1911 have not been thoroughly covered here either.

Understanding the railway working class movement requires reading '*Oupanibeshik Rail Shramik Andolon: Khadagpur O Adra*' (Bhoumik, 2012) by Shyamapada Bhoumik. This book sheds light on the construction of rail stations in Khadagpur and Adra, the terrible working conditions, the treatment of female labourers, the railway labour movement from 1904 to 1914, the establishment of a trade union in Khadagpur, the labour movement from 1927 to 1947 in a few stages, and other topics. The range of the agitations and protests of the current research paper, however, has not been discussed in this book beyond learning about the harsh working conditions that railway workers have had to endure since their start.

'*The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*', (Sarkar, 1973) by Sumit Sarkar is another very informative work that highlights the railway strikes that happened during the Swadeshi period, describing the causes, development, and nature of all the strikes briefly. Pradosh Mitra's *Somaj Chitre Rail* (Mitra, 2016) is another important work to know the impact of railways on Indian society and economy, giving a very brief chronological history of Railway strikes. Apart from the aforementioned enormous and ground-breaking works, only a few pieces provide dispersed coverage of the railway working class agitations and protests, including their causes, nature, and growth.

Ian J. Kerr is a pioneer scholar in the history of railways from all plausible perspectives. His article on '*Working Class Protest in 19th Century India: Example of Railway Workers*' (Kerr, 1985) highlights the nature of recruiting railway workers, terms and conditions for them, their working conditions, and the nature of the formation of labour unions in 20th century India. In some cases, he brought up the context of Bengal. However, the railway strikes until 1911 were not discussed in detail.

*The World of Workers Politics: Some Issues of Railway Workers in Colonial India, 1918-1922* (Sinha, 2008) by Nitin Sinha examines a railway strike that took place in Behar and Bengal between 1918 and 1922. It does not cover the strikes up to 1911.

Therefore, bearing all of the aforementioned viewpoints in mind, this article provides a brief overview of the railway workers' strikes in colonial Bengal, including their nature, progression, reflection in the media, and the role of the media in those working-class strikes.

#### 4. NATURE OF RECRUITMENT OF RAILWAY WORKERS

When railway companies and other industries started to grow, they needed a lot of labour. To fill this need, they hired cheap landless agricultural labourers, recently educated Bengalis, and highly paid foreign workers. A variety of lower classes who were dragged into the production, distribution, and exchange processes of capitalism in India's colonial periphery made up of the poorly defined working class, e.g. workers without land, tribes, or peasants searched for wage jobs that were permanent, contractual, seasonal, or temporary. Throughout the years 1850 to 1940, every sector of contemporary industry might have used railway building, maintenance, and operating services. Furthermore, in India throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that particular sector of the Railway workers constituted the most advanced type of industrial manpower (Kerr, 1985). The increasing number of people in the jungle area also where the means of subsistence stood still "the demand for workmen on the railways completely changed the relation of labour to capital" (Hunter, 1868). But after the very few years of inception of railways "the railway workforce displayed many complexities and peculiarities from which arose different forms of protest" (Kerr, 1985). On the other hand, the railway industry was the brainchild of English capitalists and was under the control of the British government. "The railway workers, therefore, were particularly exposed to the pressures and constraints of capitalist development within a colonial situation" (Kerr, 1985). Most of the workers were employed based on contract and were not united in terms of wages and attendance. Furthermore, the abundance of the workforce served as a justification for maintaining low technological standards that allowed for the profitable exploitation of inexpensive labour (Laxman, 2007). Most of the employees were European (Ghosh, 1967). Hence, from the very beginning, discrimination was done among the workers by the railway company based on race. As a result, there was no opportunity for a united movement.

## 5. RAILWAY STRIKES BEFORE THE SWADESHI PERIOD

Almost a thousand miles of railway were constructed in Bengal till 1911. This huge and rapid expansion of railways brought about the commercialization of agriculture in Bengal, which indirectly converted large numbers of peasants into landless agricultural labourers (Surendra J. 1952). In Bengal, from the very beginning of the railway industries, the nature of recruitment was based on contracts through Indian contractors. Coolies were temporary workers based on daily wages, but some permanent construction workers had to move from one site to another, and others were clerks directly recruited by the railway company. The workers were not yet united and organized. So they had to work hard for a whole day without sensing any organized agitation. Between 1851 and 1880, workers had to work approximately 12-18 hours a day for nominal wages (Dutta, 1969). Moreover, according to the Breaches Contract Act, 1859, if any artificer, workman, or labourer wilfully and without lawful or reasonable excuse neglects or refuses to perform or get performed such work according to the terms of his contract, any master or employer could complain to the magistrate of the police, and the magistrate could thereupon issue a summons or warrant. And if the accused fails to comply with the said order, the magistrate might sentence him to be imprisoned or he might have to return money to the employer (Workmen's Breach Contract Act, 1859). Comparatively to other working classes, railway workers were less able to adjust to the newly imposed work environment. Besides, the railroad-owned companies attempted to continue discrimination against Indian workers. As there was a disparity between Indians and Europeans and there was no scope for communicating with other workers, there was no such opportunity for the workers to put forward unanimous and organized demands before the Swadeshi period. Caste was yet another problem that prevented them from organizing for an extended period. Despite all these barriers, for the first time, the railway workers in Bengal started to fight for their rights demanding eight working hours. The struggle of the working class against capitalism has begun. (Moshel, 1958). The first and most important major incident took place at Howrah on 1st May 1862. More than 1200 workers stopped the wheels of trains by demanding a cut in working hours. It lasted for three days.

Despite suppressive Press Act No. 14 of 1857, the contemporary vernacular newspapers *Somprakash* penned for the workers - "Around 1200 workers of Howrah Railway Station left their works. According to the rules of the locomotive department of the Howrah section, the workers were supposed to work for 8 hours but in practice, they were made to work for 10 hours and due to that, the work was suspended for a few days." Not only that *The Somprakash* wrote in a very protesting language- "Fulfill the demand of railway workers, otherwise you won't get people to continue your work further" (*Somprakash*, 5th May, 1862). Although the demand was not fulfilled at the time, the newspapers' moral support for workers' rights gave the labour movement more spirit and momentum.

Railway workers were the pioneers to demand the reduction of working hours in India. The creation of such a phenomenon had some effect on the political awakening of the working class long before the world phenomenon that did not then manifest itself outside India. From this, it can be assumed that the political consciousness of the Indian workers was revealed. The strike in 1862 was followed by a strike by clerks of the East India Railway Audit Department. This time the demand was not to reduce the working hours but to protest against humiliation by the European head clerks and officials. Humiliation and negligence towards the clerks, workers, and railway passengers were the daily routine at that time, which has been reflected regularly in contemporary Bengali and English newspapers. When the chief of the audit department insulted the Bengali clerks, all of the clerks collectively protested by being absent day after day. That time, the protest was not limited to the strike itself; the agitation was intensified with regular insistence in front of the office until the incident was resolved. A protest and strike by the employees led to a final settlement of the incident with an official apology to the workers by the officials. The officers had to express their regret and apologize, which was a glorious victory for the Howrah railway workers (Moshel, 1958). What the newspapers urged for worker's rights, the Government agreed that- "adequate wages benefit both the owners of the capital and the labourers as well" (*Somprakash*, 9th June 1862).

Railway workers' agitations for their pathetic working conditions, low wages, humiliation, extortion, etc. in the workplace have been consistently reflected in contemporary newspapers. The newspapers were always at the forefront, supporting the worker's demands and agitations, which made people aware of the condition and boosted the morale of the workers as well. Albeit, from the very beginning, the Indian newspapers were aloof from the agitations made by the working class due to uncertainty about their existence, which could be seen during the strike organized by palanquin bearers. But after a few years, almost all the newspapers took on the role of raising public awareness regarding the welfare and extortions done by the British. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* at that time played a crucial role against all kinds of extortions. After examining the condition of all workplaces, it raised the question about the poor and pathetic conditions



of young people who were working hard for money by sacrificing their bodies, minds, freedom and self-esteem. The newspaper raised a voice against the subjugation suffered by the Indian people (*Amritabazar Patrika*, 8th July, 1869).

This newspaper explains the reasons for all these obligations reporting: The British are plundering all the money of our country by imposing high taxes on land, making all goods more and more expensive by exporting them out of India. In this situation, family expenses are quadrupling from the previous years, and all this is forcing our thousands of youths to engage in clerical work to meet this scarcity. In this scenario, railway development has been very useful, and thousands of people are finding their earnings in these projects. Since none of them are academically qualified, they are all unable to pursue other independent careers. As a result, people are giving everything they have to the various railway departments since they have no other options. The railway authorities are taking complete advantage of this weakness and continuing their tortures over them. They are not recognizing the Indians as human beings and treating them as insignificant as coolies are being treated. The nature of these European officials is so cruel that they cannot bear a small word or tolerate small faults. It is in their nature to mistrust human nature. They have such a conception that employees cannot be maintained in subjection without severe punishment. This inhuman, dominating idea made them fond of torture. Their ethos is that it is not wrong to torture someone who is paid. Due to this, they cannot tolerate any kind of talk or even small faults. One has to work hard without receiving salaries on time. They have no religion; only what they have is work (*Amritabazar Patrika*, 8th July, 1869).

The situation reported above by the newspaper was found in the office of the railway audit in Jamalpur. The work of that office had been pending for a few days. The person who had taken on the new responsibility wanted not to keep any pending work, and to do so, he ordered to work from 1 am to 1 am (24 hours total), and there would be no Sunday to rest. Hearing this order, some young workers refused to work in that way. They did not accept work even when the officer threatened them by reducing their salary by five rupees. After listening to this cruel order, they submitted their resignation letters, but the letters were not accepted, and they were fired from their job. All the other workers were shocked and surprised to see the matter, and all of them engaged themselves in its redressal and showed the mindset of conveying their grievances to the higher authorities. (*Amritabazar patrika*, 8th July, 1869). On May 6, 1899, Indian workers of the Signal Association went on strike, demanding equality of pay, shorter working hours, and higher pay like Anglo Indian/European employees engaged in the same work. On July 1, 1901, a strike began at the Liluah Railway Factory in Howrah against changes in working hours. Earlier working hours were 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 12 p.m. to 3.30 p.m. after an hour's rest. According to the new schedule, working hours are fixed from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 1 p.m. to 4-30 minutes, with an hour of rest in between. Working hours had been increased for Indian workers instead of decreasing. This was fatal for the low-paid Railway workers. Moreover, within the political turmoil of Indian national politics, the British government implied a divide-and-rule policy between the Hindu and Muslim working classes, which made the strike abortive (Chowdhury, 2012).

## 6. STRIKES DURING THE SWADESHI PERIOD:

The Swadeshi period witnessed a series of strikes launched by railway workers. Numerous workers were working in many areas under the railway company during the period. The first strike was started by the 247 clerks of the Burn Company in Howrah in protest against new work regulations in September 1905. Next month, another notable strike was led by the tram conductors of Calcutta trams. Oppressive service conditions, harassment in working places, low wages, and hard work for a long time led them to walk out of their duties in five sections on October 6, 1905 (Sarkar, 2020).

After a long mental preparation with depression and anxiety, they gave a petition to the managing committee demanding more wages. They demand consolidated monthly wages, better uniforms, working hours from 4:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. at a time, and then another 4 working hours after taking a rest of three hours in between. They demanded permission to sit down when there were no passengers (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21st Oct, 1905). At that time they got support from samiti leaders - Apurba Kumar Ghosh, Ashwini Commer Banerji, and so on. The strike of the tramway conductors had taken a new turn when Mr. A.C. Banerjee had an interview with Mr. Martin Wells, the Managing Agent of the Tramways Co., on October 8 and 9, 1905. After a long conversation on October 9, 1905, it was decided that Mr Banerjee would persuade the men to go back to their work, and after resuming their work, only their grievance would be considered. It was, however, settled that their petition would be considered and an order would be passed on it in consultation with Mr. Banerjee, who was representing the conductors early next week. The men, under the advice of Mr. Banerjee, who strongly insisted on going back at once, resumed work on Tuesday, October 10, 1905. *Amritabazar Patrika*

wrote- a huge strike could have been avoided by that decision (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15th October, 1905). It seemed for the first time in the history of the Bengali working class movement that the working class's demands were going to be met, but later the management turned their backs and rejected almost all the demands of the conductors who were rigid and stuck with the existing terms and conditions, which were supposed to be accepted by the management (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3rd Nov 1905). The management also dragged a case against nine drivers till April 1906, and they were given rigorous imprisonment of three months, and a few conductors were dismissed from their work (*Bengalee*, 19 April 1906). Aswinicoomer Bannerjee and other members of the Anti-Circular Society raised funds for the victimized employees.

In Bengal, there were three workshops—at Lilooah, Kharagpur and Jamalpur employing about 5000, 3600, and 8200 men, respectively (Sarkar, 1973). There were a few reasons behind all the agitations aroused by the workers during this period - Firstly, the social and racial differences among the Anglo-Indian employees, white collar employees who belonged to *Bhadralok* society, and the rest of the Indian workers (the proletariat of railway workshops), who were always out of the fringe of elite class workers. Even very often, there was competition amongst the Indian employees for inclusion into that *Bhadralok* circle; secondly, oppression and extortion over lower class workers; thirdly, wage differences; and fourthly, the influence of nationalist ideology over the Indian working class. Though the strike could not fulfil their demands at that time, it was carried to the next level immediately next year.

In July 1906, all the workers and employees of the East Indian Railway called for a notable strike, which continued for two months from July to September 1906. The Bengali workers of the East Indian Railway went on strike, demanding equal pay and working hours with European and Anglo-Indian workers. Employees from different stations arranged a meeting with the workers of EIR and issued a notice as the railway traffic system was stopped. It was decided at the meeting that nineteen-point demands would be presented. However, the demands of the organized railway workers were not accepted by the railway administration. To fructify the demands, they had to go through a series of agitations. Labour discontent was being given some amount of political direction for the first time by a group of nationalist leaders. Aswini Kumar Banerji, Pravatkusum Roychoudhury, Apurbakumar Ghosh, and Premtosh Bose stood out for their support (Sarkar, 1973). Famous nationalists, both moderate and extremist, and congress leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Liyakat Hussain supported and advised the strikers. During 1905-6 so many strikes were launched by Burn clerks, tram conductors, and railway employees, and all of those were allegedly swayed by 'socialist' ideas preached by Prabhatkusum Roychaudhuri and Apurbakumar Ghosh.

Material grievances like rising prices, conditions of work and pay, and ill-treatment by white officials were the main causes of the strike. Unions were organized for press employees, jute workers, and railway men. Nationalist interest in labour unrest in foreign-managed concerns reached a climax with the two-month-long East Indian Railway strike of July-September 1906. All the movements, organized by Bengali Hindu station masters and clerks of the East Indian Railway between July and September 1906, evoked the most sustained nationalist interest. The famous 'Railway Men's Union was established' and spread over Bengal by the initiatives of A. K. Ghosh as president and Premtosh Bose as secretary, along with Liakat Hussain (Sarkar, 1973). Special Branch of Police reported that "failing to their varied attempts to coerce the company into granting the extravagant demands set up by them on behalf of the strikers, the Calcutta agitators, chiefly Premtosh Bose, A.K. Ghosh and Liakat Hussain, had since August transferred the scene of their machination to the railway centres of Asansol, Ranigunj, Jamalpur, and Sahibganj, insisting on the workmen there to join the Railway Union, which they have started and which is to support all railway workers who went on strike.....Secret meetings have been held in Asansol, Calcutta, and insidious attempts made to get even the coolies to join the strikers. Itinerant employees of the railway have used their opportunities to spread dissatisfaction up and down the line, and suggestions were even thrown out that a social boycott should be employed to force the men to go on strike" (Special Branch Report, September 7, 1906). The best contemporary analysis of the causes of the strikes was given in the monthly journal *Swadeshi* in 1906, during the EIR movement. It attributed the "extraordinary frequency" of strikes to the rise in prices, inadequate salaries, and the "inhuman" behaviour of the white authorities (Sarkar, 1973).

In October 1907, harmful rules were imposed on the clerks of the Burn Company, which harmed their dignity. The movement was based on the fact that the clerks should be given a thumb impression along with written attendance in the attendance book. The clerks went on strike as long as the strike was settled honourably, and *Surhid Somaj* was taking care of that. Renowned member Rasbihari Mukherjee sympathizes with the strike. The company did not want to take the strikers lightly. The levy continued to cover the costs of the strikers. *Suhrid Somaj* joined it. Students collected many subscriptions for theatre for puja, but the members were trying to spend those subscriptions on strikers and their

families, and there was dissension between the students and active nationalist members of Suhrid Somaj. However, the strike of clerks became successful at that time (Mukhopadhyay, 1956).

Again, tram drivers took steps towards striking and demanding wages in 1907. They were not getting as much as they had worked for. Due to the scarcity of rice and the price hike, they were unable to meet their household demands. So political leaders in Bengal advised them to launch a strike to increase wages. This time, with the help and support of nationalist leaders and Indian newspapers, the tram drivers won their victory.

Thus, a series of railway strikes were found during the Swadeshi period. About 300 workers of the East Bengal State Railway Workshop at Beliaghata went on strike on October 16, 1907, demanding extra puja allowances. On November 18, 1907, railway workers in Asansol took a very remarkable step by ceasing work in the support of their many demands. The strike became a bellwether for all Indian railway workers. The strike was so intense that no train could reach Calcutta. Even the ports of Calcutta were almost rendered useless, as the port workers also abstained from their work and maintained strike solidarity with the railway workers (Anonymous, 2007). The winter (December) of 1907 also saw brief strikes by the railway workshop at Samastipur (North Bihar). After granting an extra allowance to the workers to meet the famine conditions at that time in the region, the workers returned to work (Ramanujam, 1986). Though they returned to work, the pointsmen at Chakradharpur on the Bengal-Nagpur line and the Indian drivers (mainly Muslim) and firemen of the Eastern Bengal State Railway started their protests. Thus, during the entire Swadeshi period, workers in nearly all railway sectors began expressing their protest, demanding their interests.

Not only protests and strikes have been showcased, but railways have sometimes been the victims of outrages as well. On December 6, 1907, some railway coolies who were entirely innocent had been convicted for trying to blow up Fraser's train near Narayangarh. Later, this incident was recognized as the "first overt act of the secret society" (sarkar, 1973). In the same year, at Chingripota railway station, south of Calcutta, the first Swadeshi dacoity case was arranged. It was the first time a few Swadeshi youths were trying to steal railway goods. The magistrate who was acquitting the accused refused to believe that such *Bhadralok* youths could be robbers. During this period, when the national congress split into two trends in the Surat Congress in 1907, many moderate leaders in Bengal started to show their radical faces, and nationalism continued to grow at breakneck speed. The plan for the division of Bengal by Lord Curzon had enraged the locals (Sheffield Daily Telegram, 4th September, 1905) "Mr. Naoroji said: In the Bengal partition the Bengalese had just and great grievance. It was a bad blunder for England" (*Sheffield Evening Telegram*, Thursday, 27th December 1906). The London Daily News observes: "It cannot be good statesmanship to launch these new provinces in a condition of seething discontent or to alienate the third of our fellow-subjects in India." (London Daily News, Friday, September 29, 1905). On this fiery onset, railway strikes also got a new direction with new nationalism.

## 7. NATURE OF RAILWAY MOVEMENTS DURING THE SWADESHI PERIOD

The primary causes of the strikes organized from 1903 to 1908 were mainly material grievances, no doubt. Material grievances like rising prices, conditions of work and pay, and ill-treatment by white officials became the crucial causes behind all that unrest among the railway workers. Even with that, the nature of the strikes during the Swadeshi period got new waves along with their previous aspects. To collectively voice their demands and engage in negotiation with the authorities, workers began to organize themselves into unions at this time. These unions occasionally planned and conducted railway strikes to put the management under strain. The nature of railway strikes changed throughout time, and the Swadeshi movement had a big influence on Bengal's labour movements. Labour strikes began to take on a more political aspect as the Swadeshi movement grew stronger, becoming entwined with the larger struggle for independence and the promotion of native products (Swadeshi goods) over British goods. Along with their demands, the spirit of the national movement was added to that. Against the price hikes of necessary goods and ethnic humiliation, organised labour strikes started to get support from Swadeshi leaders and nationalist newspapers. The support of newly grown Samiti or society intensified the proto-national spirit among young Bengalis during the Swadeshi period (Hees, 2009). Aswinicoomar Banerji, Prabhatkusum Roychaudhuri, Apurbakumar Ghosh and Premtosh Bose, Krishnakumar Mitra and Ambicacharan Majumdar, Liyakat Hussain and many others like them who were the main leaders of the Samiti movement and the militant volunteers became very closely associated with these types of labour strikes. Many Swadeshi leaders took the initiative to form permanent trade unions to provide legal support to workers on strike and started to collect money for strike funds. A few strikes were mediated and solved with the help of these leaders (Mukhopadhyay, 1960). Though a large scale of Muslim participation was not realized during the period, Muslim leaders like Abul Husain and Liakat Husain participated in railway strikes. Muslim drivers on the Eastern Bengal State Railway took pledges on the

Koran when they in turn walked out in December 1907. Few of them became the members of the Anti Circular Society and were assisted by other agitators like Ghaznavi, Rasul, Din Muhammad, Dedar Bux, and so on (Sarkar, 1973) to move forward the labour movement.

## 8. ROLE OF NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

The role of newspapers in supporting the workers to meet their demands is another important trait. "In India in bondage, the press played its distinctive role as the crusading agent for the political emancipation of the country" (Moitra, 1955). But during the Swadeshi period, only the indigenous newspapers actively gave moral support to the working class. *Prabashi*, *Sadharani*, *Amritabazar Patrika*, and most importantly, *Sandhya* and *Bengali* etc, raised their voices against the oppression and extortion done by the British government and its companies. Nationalist ideology boosted several publications in such a way that they took a fierce and active role in propagating nationalism within the working class as well. *Amrita Bazar*, *Probashi*, *Sadharani*, *Sandhya*, *Bengali*, and *Swaraj* started to publish news regularly on the working class and their demands. The Office of the *Sandhya* became the centre for meetings for the workers, nationalist leaders, and the editor (Brahmabandhav Upadhyay). On July 27, 1906, the foundation of the Railwaymen's Union was laid at the *Sandhya* office only (Sarkar, 1973). The motto of *Sandhya* was elaborated- "If death comes in the striving, the death will be converted to Immortality". *Sandhya* also reported "People are soundly thrashing a *Firrenghi* whenever they are coming across one.... and thrashing of European soldiers are continuing..." but "Listen, you will hear the Mother's trumpet are sounding...." (Patel, 2008). The same has been reflected in the British newspaper. The *Argus* wrote that "A strike of rather serious nature is reported on the East Indian Railway. In one case, there was a dastardly attempt to wreck a train, which fortunately failed." The newspaper was getting all the news regarding labour troubles that happened in October 1905 which were "supposed to be connected with the ill feeling arising from the partition of Bengal." "The press thus gradually became the mouthpiece of suffering people" (Moitra, 1955).

## 9. CONCLUSION

The introduction of print media and railway construction are the productions of the same year introduced by the British colonial power in India. Both way railways and newsprint of colonial Bengal intertwined as they both emerged in the same century. Newsprint found new fodder for publication, while railways gained a platform to disseminate notices and updates. Initially, publications like *Bengal Harkaru*, *The Statesman*, and others lauded the railways' necessity and amusement. Yet, as time elapsed, the narrative shifted. From 1862 onwards, newspapers like *Sangbad Prabakar*, *Prabashi*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* etc., echoed the demands of railway workers and criticised economic exploitation. Despite their legal obligations, many Bengali newspapers voiced their role reporting all the agitations and extortions faced by the railway workers. Newspapers not only voiced the agitations raised by the workers but also directly supported the workers to be organised and united together before and during the Swadeshi period which was followed by the later working class movement in colonial India.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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