# Engines vs. Elephants –
# Train Tales of India's Modernity

## Nitin Sinha

Abstract: The encounter between engines and elephants was represented in colonialist writings as metaphors for 'clash of civilizations'. Precisely because of this reason, the essay uses this binary to delve deeper into the train tales of India's modernity. Peoples, technologies and places together made up India's railway modernity. In events, claims and histories such as those of alleged British superiority and native ignorance lay the train tales of India's modernity.

    In encounters between engines and elephants we find the everyday practices of this modernity. Institutions and their role in the process of nation-state building of course give us a bigger picture of political and social change. Laws, regulations and policies do speak about the intention of the state and the production of subjecthood (or the lack of it in some cases). But stories connected with quotidian matters, fantasies and imaginations, satire and rhetoric, and more importantly their retellings are no less powerful than factsheets of institutions to understand the complex encounters and adaptations that constitute modernity in its processual form. The power of steam was pitted against the force of Oriental beliefs. The essay, which makes use of a largely untapped rich visual archive available for railway studies, however argues that the tracks of modernity often did not erase the site of tradition. In place of simple framework of competition and co-existence it proposes to explore the transport modernity of India through regional and functional segmentation and dependence.

In the late 1910s, a satirical sketchbook *The Koochpurwanaypore Swadeshi Railway* was anonymously published. The sketches about this imaginary railway line, KPR, were earlier published in *The Great Indian Peninsular Railway Magazine* but were brought together in a book form with a claim that 'they may serve to amuse the Railwaymen of India and the general public' (Jo Hookum n.d.: Foreword).[1] A perusal of the book leaves no doubt

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[1] I have consulted this book in the British Library. Hurd II and Kerr have dated it 1920 although it is not clear which edition they are referring to (Hurd & Kerr 2012: 127, fn. 44). I am thankful to Maria Framke for bringing to my notice that some sketches were already reprinted in the *Indian Ambulance Gazette*, VII, 1, 1917 but they could also be taken directly from the GIPR Magazine. The sketches were definitely produced in the context of the First World War and the ongoing Swadeshi based anti-colonial thinking.

that the sole purpose was to mock the technological and organisational skills of Indian workers of all ranks and classes. Those who would soon be running the country, according to this book, were unfit to run the world's third largest railways. Being 'truly Swadeshi in conception, equipment, and management' the KPR was the ideal future of Indian railways which would be attained only 'when the English finally leave India' (Ibid.).[2]

KPR was not only a line but also an imaginary railway town. Although the claim of the author or publisher was to amuse both railwaymen and the general public of India, the tone and content was not just of providing amusement through insiders' industrial jokes but of deep political satire. The very title contained three Hindi words in their typical Anglicized spelling: Kooch purwa nay (*kuch par͈vāh nahīṃ*), meaning 'it doesn't matter at all'. So Koochpurwanaypore was a town where nothing mattered. At what expense this mocking satire operated was therefore quite evident: by pictorially showing the ineptness of Swadeshi skills (both in terms of production and services) in each and every department of railway management. The chief engineer was depicted enjoying nautch (an Anglicized word of *nāch* meaning a performance by dancing girls) in his office and the general manager was asleep under the cool breeze of a *paṅkhā* (Engl. 'fan'). The subalterns of the railway workforce on the other hand formed the K.P.R. Pioneer Corps with tools ranging from simple drill machine to traditional broom and basket.

The *language of command* was the only thing Indians allegedly comprehended. *Hukum* (Engl. 'command') was their predilection; it was their necessity. No wonder, the author caricatured the authorial position itself to generate sarcasm and satire. The author's name given in the title of the book is 'Jo hookm' (*jo hukum*; Engl. 'as ordered').[3] Each of the engravings in the book is signed with 'Jo hookm'. In contrast, the phrases of command and reply were turned into identities of imagined native railway families. The tribe of KPR native railway-folk had family names of Pichi (*pīchī*; Engl. 'yesterday'), Kal (*kal*; Engl. 'tomorrow'), Abbi nay (*abhī nahīṃ*; Engl. 'not

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[2] For the concept of Swadeshi see: Sarkar 1973.

[3] This is the pseudonym. Some library websites have identified the author as William Henry Deakin. See: http://www.franklin.library.upenn.edu/record.html?id=FRANKLIN_5900753&, accessed: 22.08.2016.

now'), and Hazir hi (*hāzir hai*; Engl. 'present', 'available' in terms of roll call or duty).[4] In the absence of reason and intellect, the best native/Indians could do was to follow command. For running steam engines, steel-like nerves and unfailing alacrity of the *man* was required. For long, the Raj thought Indians possessed none.

Failing to have such qualities, it must have delighted the British and Anglo-Indian railway community to see a native station master send telegram to his European superior when a drunk elephant lay across the tracks. The elephant alone had not gone berserk; the whole place was in the state of madness and confusion. From the viewpoint of its author and sympathetic readers, the message was clear: once the British were gone and the Anglo-Indians had retrenched from the railways, the whole country would turn into Mutwalabad (*matʰvālā + ābād*; Engl. 'an inebriated place'). It would remain connected through tracks but obstructed by elephants.
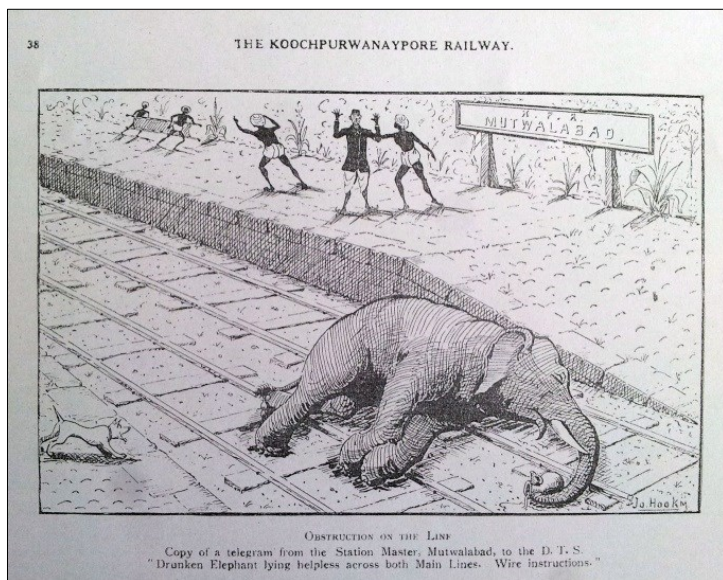


*Image 1: Obstructions on the Line.*
*Source: The Koochpuranaypore Swadeshi Railway, published with permission from the British Library, © The British Library Board, ORW.1986.c.29.*

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[4] The texts accompanying the sketches make it amply clear that these one words usually used by natives were answers to the commanding questions of the sahib.

This, of course, was the dominant trope of the Raj and its representations of Indians. This powerful imagery had complex historical truths refracting through it. The power of simplified representation and the truth of historical complexity therefore need to be addressed together. For instance, keeping racial prejudices aside, as early as the 1860s, Indian drivers were deemed fit to run engines in certain parts of the country. In Madras this was encouraged right after the introduction of the railways in the 1860s. Ironically on the same Great Indian Peninsular Railways in whose magazines the sketches first appeared, by the end of 1882 no fewer than sixty native engine drivers were in employment.[5] These men must have waited a while to command mail express engines as initially Indians were only put in charge of goods trains. But examples such as these clearly show that the racialised satire at the expense of the alleged lack of skill was only one aspect of the history of train tales of India.

The reason the colonial state vindicated the employment of natives was financial. Indian labour was cheaper than imported British skilled workforce. We can read this interplay between race and financial constraints in two ways which apparently stand in contradiction to each other. One, the practice of employing Indians can be seen as a compromise of the racial division and a limitation to the discourse of European racial superiority. Two, the logic of economics itself can be seen as framed by racial beliefs, thus reiterating rather than compromising the unequal racial divisions. The Indian engine drivers were employed not because they were skilled or could be skilled but because they were cheap on the imperial scale of racialised labour market. The skilled white labour, on the contrary, was very expensive.[6]

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[5] 1883. "General News", in: *The Edinburgh Evening News* (14 September 1883): n. p.
[6] In England this debate had a strong class connotation. It was said that drivers ought to be hired from 'higher classes' particularly when the existing ones were found 'deficient in brains'. 1910. "A Good Word for Our Engine Drivers", in: *The Railway Magazine*, XXVI, Jan-June: 344.

Peoples, technologies and places together made up India's railway moder-
nity. In events, claims and histories such as those of alleged British superior-
ity and native ignorance lay the train tales of India's modernity. In encoun-
ters between engines and elephants we find the everyday practices of that
modernity. In Mutwalabad, the lines of modernity, at least momentarily,
were disrupted by the weight of mighty oriental traditionalism but in
Burdwan the same traditional beast carried people to witness the charm
and surprise of the railway modernity.
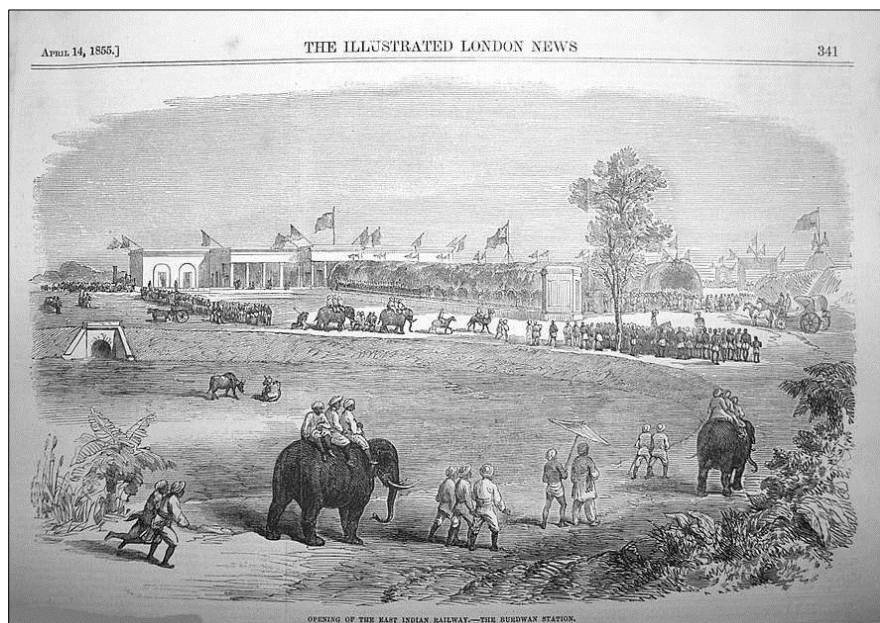


*Image 2: Opening of the East Indian Railway, Bengal.*
*Source: The Illustrated London News, April 14, 1855.*[7]

The encounters between engines and elephants and other such instances
provide gateways into exploring the commensurate but deviant tracks of
India's tryst with modernity. Through them, we get a sense of the making of

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http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/britishrule/railwa
ys/iln1855.jpg

time, travel and geography. Institutions and their role in the process of nation-state building of course give us the bigger picture of the state, society and polity. Laws, regulations and policies do speak about the intention of the state and the production of subjecthood (or the lack of it in some cases). But mundane stories connected with quotidian matters, fantasies and imaginations, satire and rhetoric, and more importantly their retellings are no less powerful than factsheets of institutions to understand the complex encounters and adaptations that constituted modernity in its processual form. This short essay uses one such binary of engines vs. elephants to talk about this modernity. There could be many more which directly deal with our social world and its manifold realities: beasts and gods; ghosts and machines; bullock carts and motor cars; and not least, pigeons and electric telegraph.

## SALAAMING THE ENGINE

Railway engines running on the power of steam were championed as the harbinger of modernity. Speed and punctuality were the essence of this new modern technology. On the other hand, India was seen and portrayed as the land of elephants and indolent people, not to forget snake charmers. Engines and elephants represented two civilisations, two epochs that came face to face.
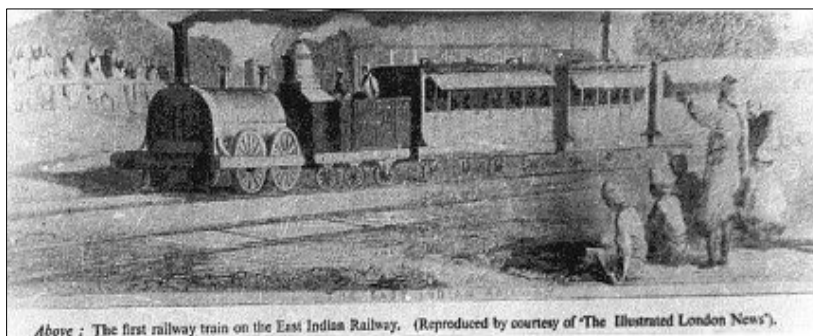


*Above : The first railway train on the East Indian Railway. (Reproduced by courtesy of 'The Illustrated London News').*

*Image 3: First Railway Train on the East Indian Railway.[8]*

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[8] Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_Train_of_East_Indian_Railway-1854.jpg

Soon after its introduction in India, the British parliament was assured that the whistle of the steam engine would force the slumbering *rājā* (Engl. 'landlord/king') trotting on the back of the elephant to change his way. The director of Indian Railways Juland Danvers proclaimed 'now even a Rajah […] in his own territory must submit to the "imperative call" of the railway bell' (Danvers 1877: 28). The general thrust of colonialist writings was that the power of steam would become the panacea for all ills Indian society and culture stood for. For instance, besides instilling a new sense of time, railways were said to unshackle the caste system.[9]

The old had to make the way for new. The black beauty represented calm concentrated power. When the wheels of the *Falkland* moved on the opening of the first railways in Bombay, the *Illustrated London News* reported that the ageless superstitions of natives had melted away. Engine was the new divinity to which natives salaamed as it passed.[10] Thousands of natives and a dozen of Europeans witnessed the first railways snorting, hissing and finally moving from the shed.[11] One eye witness report claimed that the moving iron-horse put natives in awe and wonder. The 'hissing monster' which was called *āg-gārī* (Engl. 'fire carriage') in native parlance was not only to be seen from a distance but to be touched, stood upon and ran along with.[12]

The enchantment with engine was not unique to the colonial world. Both amidst general public and railway workforce engines were a subject of fascination in metropolis as well as colony. In Britain, while the railway enthusiasts drew pleasure by spotting engines and using yet another contemporary new technology of the camera to take interesting eye-catching shots, the drivers and their mates who were part of the railway workforce shored up their identities of hard working men by discursively relating themselves to engines. In the poem titled 'A Knight of the Footplate' it was

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[9] This view although dominant was not without its internal fractures, which has recently been convincingly shown by Sumangala Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya 2015: 411-430).

[10] 1853. "Opening of the First Railway in India", in: *Illustrated London News* (04 June 1853): 436.

[11] 1852. "India", in: *The Fife Herald* (15 April 1852): 1; 1852. "The first running of a railway locomotive in India", in: *The Westmorland Gazette and Kendal Advertiser* (17 April 1852): 3.

[12] 1852. "The First Running of a Railway Locomotive in India", in: *Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser* (13 April 1852): n. p. The other name for the engine was *āg-boat.* 1852. "The First Locomotive in India", in: *The Inverness Courier* (22 April 1852): n. p.

said, 'She dursn't stop to dawdle, for she knows who's on her back, She knows he'll help her up a bank, but flog her if she's slack.'[13]

The early railway enthusiasts in India might not have used their cameras but the element of charm and surprise — the bewilderment that the moving engine caused — was equally pronounced. There were some other things that were similar between the metropolis and the colony. One was the feminine address to the engine. She was a black beauty who could either make an apprentice her slave or happily obey her efficient master who would flog her if required.

In India perhaps the added element was of divinity. Myriad stories circulated in the print bazaar of the British Empire that used engine and the technology of steam to drive home the point that religious superstition of Indians would soon change, in fact, disappear. The power of steam was pitted against the force of Oriental beliefs. One such story reported was of a Brahmin reportedly exclaiming the following when the 'fire horse' *Lawrence* reached the Punjab, 'All the incarnations of all the gods in India never produced such a thing as that.'[14] The same was the case on the other side of the country. The power of steam enraptured the imagination of natives; the Bengalis flocked to see how the new 'car of Indra' looked.

How much of this reportage, gossip, stories, anecdotes, and their retellings about the religiosity towards engines and their reverence was the felt belief of Indians and how much was simply imputed to them through these literary representations to score the note of civilizational victory is difficult to decide. It can only be understood through examining each such representation in its context and juxtaposing it with other examples. Were such faith based relationships with engines only restricted to oriental subjects? When it came to engines and superstitions related to them, British and Anglo-Indians were no less firm believers than Indians. No. 31 in the Jamalpur work sheds was not popular with her drivers as she had reportedly on one occasion killed her driver and on another got derailed. Apparently,

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[13] 1901. "A Knight of the Footplate", in: *The Railway Magazine* 8, Jan.-June: 236.
[14] 1862. "Steam in India", in: *The Dublin Evening Mail* (15 May 1862): n. p.; 1862: "The Locomotive in India", in: *Dundee Advertiser* (2 May 1862): 6.

'[t]he drivers went sick or took leave when they were told off for her.'[15] In narrating this Rudyard Kipling turned  the engine no. 31 into an active agent of her own despise and awe that created superstition amongst the non-Indian railway workforce.

Was it just the clash of civilizations that were depicted in these stories or something deeper was at work? Do they show only conflict between two cultures — here represented through two modes of conveyance — or these depictions can be differently read to go beyond simplistic understanding of conflict and confrontation? Do above expressions also not show how railways with all their novelty still came to be understood through the language of providential creation? Next to traditional forms of godly vehicles stood the engine. When railways became the new vehicle of Indra the modern sensibility of speed and mechanical robustness was both acknowledged as novel and yet co-opted into the existing structures of tradition. The engine did not displace the belief in Indra. It rather became his vehicle. It should not therefore surprise us when we find instances of co-existence. The tracks of modernity often did not erase the site of tradition as is clear from the image below.
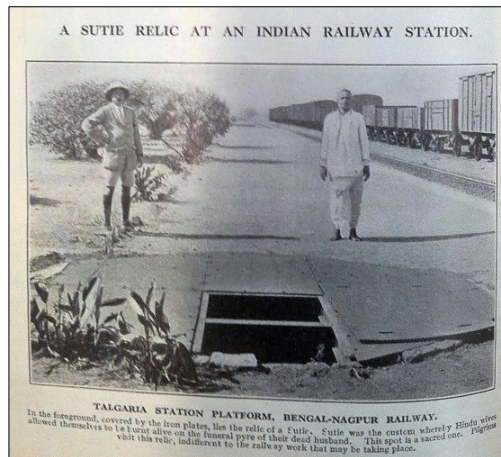


*Image 4: 'A Sutie Relic at an Indian Railway Station'.*
*Source: The Railway Magazine, LIII, July to December 1923.*

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[15] Rudyard Kipling, "The Shops". This was part of the three chapters written by Kipling on Jamalpur in the late 1880s. I have used the online version available at: https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kipling/rudyard/railway/chapter2.html, accessed: 23.08.2016.

## ENCOUNTER WITH THE WILD

The encounter with culture was one aspect of presenting this modernity. The encounter with landscape which was often described as wild and untamed was another. The masculine efforts of European engineers and mechanics in constructing Indian railways through forests and marshes, in settling new towns surrounded by jungles and hills were incomplete without heroic stories of encounter with tigers. Numerous such stories were published in newspapers and reported in diaries and letters of these mechanics and engineers, which were sent back home that bolstered up the pride in these young 'lads'. The empire relied on the robustness of technology and scientific advancement; the imperial vision and pride required individual stories for its sustenance.

The encounter with the wild was a way to depict the wildness of India itself. Such encounters also worked to show the native timidity and fear vis-à-vis British natural instinct for adventure and courage. So went a story from Jamalpur, which was surrounded by hills on three sides. Regular spotting of a tiger filled the native community with terror but for Europeans it stoked a desire for sport. The former went to the Kali temple to pray for safety but the latter donned the *śikārī* (Engl. 'hunter') attire and managed to kill the 8 ½ feet long tiger.[16]

Some encounters were not so fun filled. After two nights of constant vigil, Greer, a Jamalpur workshop fitter, managed to kill a tiger but was himself found dead next to the tiger in his bungalow.[17] In yet another, a 27 years young mechanic was killed by a tiger. To avenge his death, his friends shot down the tiger. The grave erected in the friend's memory read: 'In the midst of Life we are in Death'.[18] This poetic expression of remembrance probably played upon the long standing grievance of British who described their service in India as exile. This sentiment was very popular amongst Railway folks as well. The friends of the mechanic buried the tiger about thirty yards away from its victim's grave. This fatal encounter during the

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[16] 1896. "Narrow Escape from a Tiger", in: *The Cork Examiner* (12 August 1896): 6.

[17] 1885. "Encounter with a Tiger", in: *The Edinburgh Evening News* (18 July 1885): n. p.

[18] "Archives of the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia", Mss EUR F370/92, British Library, London.

lifetime turned into a graveyard camaraderie after the death. Exile had its own peculiar ways of reconciling life with death.

For displaying personal valour as well as unstoppable march (and conquest) of imperial scientific enterprises, colonial landscapes were again and again overwritten by acts of personal heroism. Victory and tragedy both contributed to the stock of heroism. This man-tiger encounter has not only filled the pages of contemporary imperial reminiscences in both textual and visual forms but also subsequently proved to be an important theme of study for imperial masculinity. Parallel to this was the encounter of engine and elephant which has hardly been looked at.

The 'nature of the beast' to use the English saying quite in its literal sense, was however, different. Throughout the nineteenth century elephants did not pose a threat or become an object of adventurous hunting in the same way as tigers, antelopes and cheetahs did. To repeat, it wasn't that elephants were not hunted. An elephant hunt was organised when the Prince of Wales had visited Ceylon in December 1875.[19] But usually elephants were used for hunting rather than being hunted.

Apart from their use in finishing public works, the majestic character attached to them made elephants the preferred vehicle for royal mobility. Not only native rajas continued using them but also viceroys and other officials who alighted from their first class salons to march into towns on the back of elephants. State howdahs (ornamented covered seats fixed atop elephants) were maintained for these purposes.

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[19] 1875. "The Prince of Wales in India. The Elephant Hunt", in: *The Daily Gazette* (14 December 1875): 3. Also see http://www.victorianweb.org/history/empire/india/32.html, accessed: 23.08.2016, for the image of the Prince posing with the dead elephant. Interestingly, elephant hunting was banned by the colonial government in Ceylon because of the diminution in numbers of these 'useful and intelligent animals' due to hunting. The idea was to preserve the existing numbers because of their utility with public works. 1875. "Foreign and Colonial News", in: *The Illustrated London News* (29 May 1875): n. p.
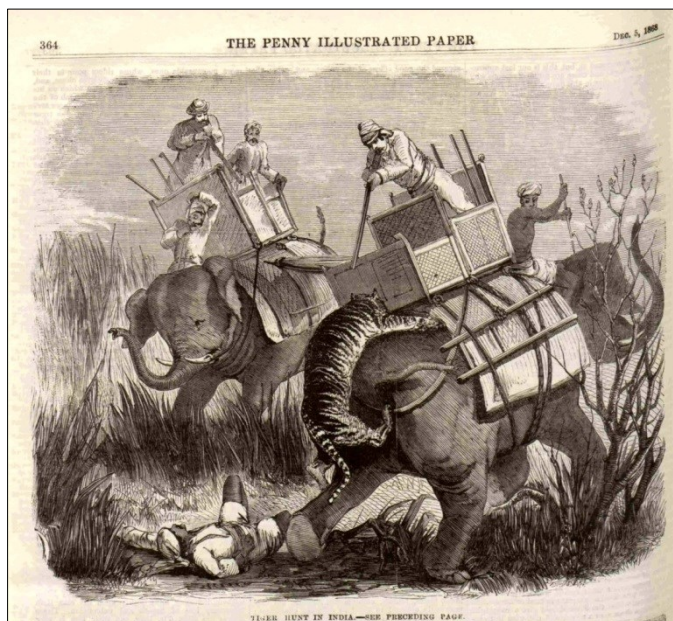
*Image 5: Tiger Hunt in India.*
*Source: The Penny Illustrated Paper, December 05 1868.[20]*

In some instances, however, the clash between engines and elephants was direct and the effect violent. The symbolic and visual value of this clash was not lost either on publishers or readers. It made headlines in popular magazines. In 1869, on the East Indian Railway line an accident took place that was reportedly unheard of anywhere in the history of railways all over the world. The story reported in several newspapers and magazines was something like this: a group of almost seventy elephants resting in a mango grove got irked by the red light, noise and the sound of the passing engine in the night. They tried to break free of their fastenings. Then '[o]ne large male, however, the strongest and most courageous of the lot, became so infuriated that he broke his chain and rushed forward to intercept and encounter the supposed enemy.'[21] Of course, the 'poor brute's' strength proved of no match against the 'steam and machinery' and was killed on the spot.

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[20] *Image reproduced with kind permission of The British Newspaper Archive,* http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/.
[21] 1869. "The Elephant and the Railway", in: *The Glasgow Daily Herald* (09 February 1869): 2.

REGISTERED AT THE GENERAL POST OFFICE FOR TRANSMISSION ABROAD.

No. 385.     LONDON, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1869.     Vol. XVI.

AN ELEPHANT CHARGING A TRAIN IN INDIA.—SEE NEXT PAGE.

*Image 6: An Elephant Charging a Train in India.*
*Source: The Penny Illustrated News, 13 February 1869.[22]*

Four days later, *The Penny Illustrated Paper* carried the same news but with the visual depiction of the clash.[23] The visual reality given to this incident made it appear as the clash of locomotive cultures of two different civilizations.

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[22] Image reproduced with kind permission of The British Newspaper Archive, http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/.

[23] 1869. "The Elephant and the Railway", in: *The Penny Illustrated News* (13 February 1869): 98.

## BEYOND SIMPLISTIC REPRESENTATIONS

A set of these visual representations based upon colonial claims of indigenous cultural and intellectual deficiency was one way of depicting the introduction of modernity. In this version, the Western technological advancement brought modernity to India often through painful but necessary exercise of conflict, confrontation and displacement. Howsoever exploitative, the argument ran that colonialism brought science, education, hospitals and railways into India. Symbolically, the power of the engine eventually supplanted the brute force of the elephant.

The train tales of India's modernity are, however, more complex than the above framework would have us believe. As it happens with technology, direct importation often gets adapted in the receiving society. So it happened in India with railways also. As for the manpower required for running it, despite the KPR's satirical rhetoric and all other associated cultural discourses of native inferiority, natives were employed as guards and station masters in the Madras presidency at almost six times less wage than immigrant white skilled workers. As far as the relationship between culture and modernity goes the tracks of modernity had to accommodate the site of *satī* (Engl. 'widow immolation'); in turn, the engines had to find a place in the vehicular pantheon of Hindu gods.

The power of steam and that of the elephant together constituted and represented this modernity. It is no wonder that while the stories and visuals of the engine killing the elephant circulated widely, at the same time, images of engines being hauled by elephants equally embellished the pages of newspapers and magazines. The visual reading of the picture below is rather telling in suggesting that the engine of modernity was ushered into by utilising the power of elephants, quite literally.
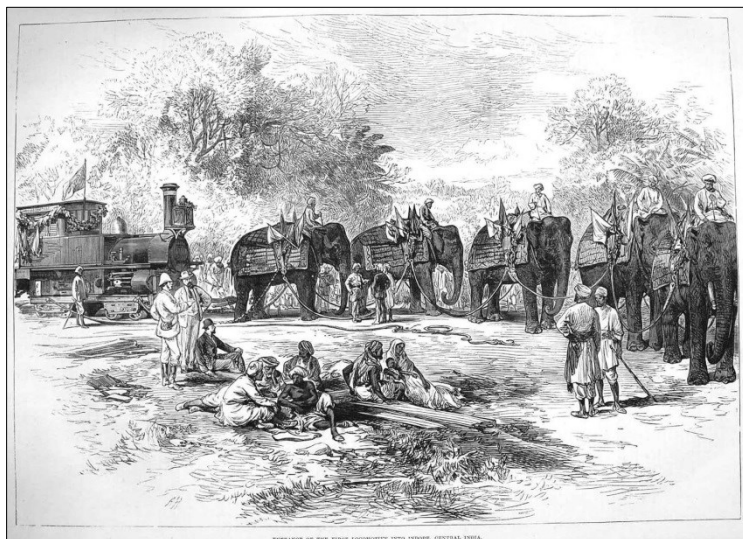
*Image 7: Entrance of the First Locomotive into Indore.*[24]

Once we speak of transport and through that of the bigger picture of Indian modernity, we soon realise that this modernity was not based upon displacement of one means by another. Complementary co-existence was the key but here also we need to go beyond the analytical pendulum of simple binary between competition and co-existence. As far as transport modernity is concerned, segmented regionalisation and functional dependence show us a way forward. The rajas, viceroys, lieutenant governors and district collectors continued to ride elephants on alighting from trains. When expensive swanky saloons of viceroys and royal visitors such as the Prince of Wales pulled over at stations, howdahs embellished with gold and silver awaited to take them into the streets of the cities.

Engines, platforms, elephants and narrow streets of bazaars were at once part of a uniform process of movement and power but each of them also had segmented relative significance. They were uniform in displaying

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[24] Source:
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/britishrule/railways/railways.html, accessed: 23.08.2016.

the continuous flow of authority and power by relying upon each other. They were segmented because they represented different codes of power, different sites of operation and served to different layers of discourses on movement and power. Engines and elephants both were ornamented to display political and cultural gaiety of the empire. But engines did win the battle of speed while elephants continued to hold the symbolic power of majesty. Until the 1970s and 80s, it was a common practice to have an elephant or two even in households of moderate zamindaries in the villages.

In the anti-colonial struggle of the 20th century, both came under attack. While Bhagat Singh and his friends attempted to loot the train that was carrying guns, few years before that Viceroy Charles Hardinge was hurt in a bomb explosion in the street of Chandni Chowk in Delhi while riding on the back of the elephant.

To conclude, let us once again turn to our satirical text. As seen below, the satirist mocked the Swadeshi spirit by showing elephants hauling the engine.
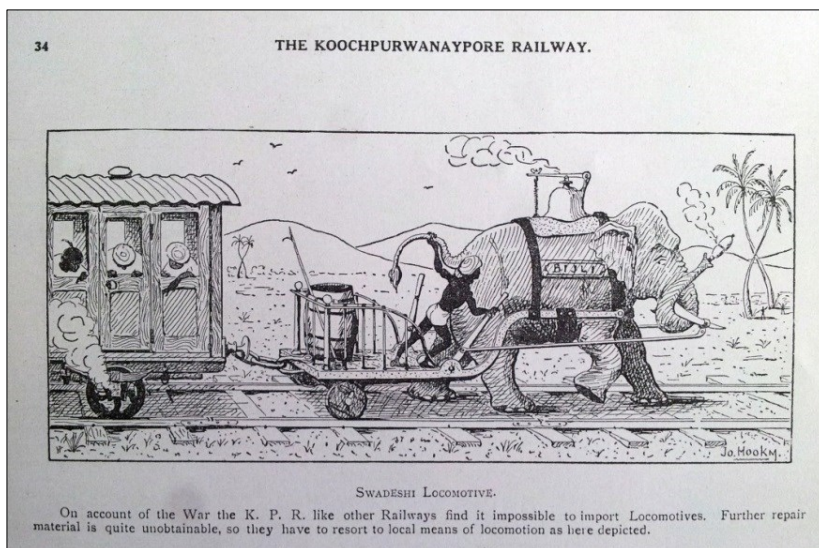


*Image 8: Swadeshi Locomotive.*
*Source: The Koochpuranaypore Swadeshi Railway, published with permission from the British Library © The British Library Board, ORW.1986.c.29.*

The satirical text's depiction of elephants pulling the train must have appeared to its readers unimaginable and hence a matter of ridicule. However, during the Second World War elephants were indeed used for shunting engines in the yards. Thanks to British imperialism whose protectionist market practice (in spite of the self-professed doctrine of the *laissez-faire*) did not allow other countries such as the U.S and Germany to supply locomotives to India, the colonial state thought it wise to turn to the power of the oriental beast when faced with the lack of locomotives. The train tales of India will ever remain incomplete if we just focus on tracks and engines and neglect what elephants did with them.



*Image 9: Elephants shunting engines.*[25]

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[25] Source http://gwydir.demon.co.uk/jo/genealogy/dibblee/railways.htm

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