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# Communication in the Colonial Era

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Almost from the time of their introduction a century and a half ago, and perhaps even before the first lines were built, the railways have been seen as a powerful force for the social, economic and, ultimately, political transformation of India. It was not only Karl Marx, in the 1850s, who reasoned thus. Many others – engineers, financiers, officials, political commentators of all persuasions – hailed the coming of the railway as a momentous event, one that uniquely brought profit, efficiency and the blessings of a superior civilisation.

Remarkably, this insistence upon the primary role of the steam locomotive in India's transport history, and hence in its economic development and technological modernity, has rarely been challenged, seldom contextualised in terms of what went before as well as what followed after. In this respect, Nitin Sinha's book represents an enterprising new departure.

Firstly, he looks to the history of early colonial Bihar to argue that the region was more than a mere transition zone between Bengal and northern India, and possessed a distinctive regional identity based on a varied topography of river, plain and upland, built around such valued commodities as opium and indigo, and centred in Patna as a leading commercial and communications hub. Secondly, Sinha takes up the first century or so of British rule (with many glances back to the earlier period of Mughal hegemony) to enquire how networks of communication developed and were transformed in this pivotal region and to establish how, when and whether the railways became an innovative force.

## Colonialising Communications

Sinha's interest is not primarily in communication in the sense of social communication, as explored by C A Bayly

## BOOK REVIEW

**Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India: Bihar, 1760s-1880s** by Nitin Sinha (London: Anthem Press, 2012; pp xxxviii + 272, £60.

in his seminal study *Empire and Information* (1996), but with networks of transportation and circulation, and the diverse functions and aspirations they served. Nor, except in a somewhat apologetic aside at the very end of the book, is Sinha greatly concerned with "native responses" (like some other recent authors, he seeks to resuscitate the problematic term "native", differentiating between indigeneity and the word's more racially pejorative use). His primary interest lies in the history of communication as reflected in, and indicative of, colonial state policy and practice, and with the ways in which colonial knowledge and colonial transport advanced, materially and conceptually, in tandem; ideas of circulation apply here as much to personnel and ideologies as they do to the transit of goods and the lives of those who transported them.

Sinha argues that communications in Bihar before the railway age were more diverse and dynamic than the still common stereotype of a "changeless" India implies. Much of what happened in the early phase of the British rule was grounded in earlier communication practices, albeit then adapted and augmented for colonial purposes. Contrary to the impression that had grown up, even by the 1820s, that, before the British, India was "road-less" or lacked "good roads", the Mughals (and their usurper Sher Shah) had been active road-builders, preoccupied with the highway as a site of taxation, policing and imperial display.

On seizing power in eastern India, the British took over many pre-existing routes, restoring some, re-routing others,

while creating the New Military Road, and later the Grand Trunk Road, to facilitate imperial communication between Calcutta and northern India, developments which in turn had major consequences for a host of secondary routes. Something of a revolution in transport and communication thus affected Bihar in the 1820s and 1830s, almost 50 years before the railways, aided by the building of "feeder" roads, had a comparable effect on many parts of the region.

In further demonstration of the importance of reaching back to the pre-colonial era, Sinha notes that touring by courts and officials was not something the British invented; here, too, there were significant Mughal precedents. But, even so, incoming colonialism acquired preoccupations of its own. The building of "goods roads" came to symbolise superior technology and a higher form of governance. As British power advanced inland from its first coastal footholds, the aspiration grew to "open up" the "interior" of India, an objectifying project that was as much ideological as it was material (Sinha misses the opportunity to liken this quest to know India through the observation gained by travel with the contemporary "opening up" of the Indian body through post-mortem examinations; both sought to bring light to inaccessible spaces, both encountered suspicion and resistance). In asking "what did it mean to travel?", he cautions that "the travelling gaze" of itinerant Europeans, far from being all-seeing or homogenising, was constrained by the physical limitations of the often routinised routes they travelled and the restricting modes of transport they employed, just as it varied from one observer, or one site of observation, to another.

In assessing the politics of colonial knowledge production, Sinha is equally wary of the view that this resulted from a reciprocal process of co-constitution and of circulatory practices that entailed free movement between Europeans and Indians, seeing knowledge formation, for all its "native" informants and

precolonial precedents, as ultimately registering the asymmetric power of colonial dominance.

### For 'Public Good'?

Evolving concepts of "the public" are pertinent here, too. Contrary to the common view that the British only undertook substantial public works from the 1850s onwards, following the establishment of the Public Works Department in 1853, Sinha shows how, despite the financial constraints imposed by London, officials in Bihar began early in the 19th century to build and repair roads, often employing gangs of convict labourers for the purpose or seeking, unsuccessfully, zamindari support for their schemes. Road-building shifted from being a strategic imperative, conducted by military agency, to an essentially civilian project, integral to an emergent strategy of moral and material "improvement" and to a self-legitimising imperialism notionally grounded in the "public good".

Meanwhile, a great deal of the goods traffic from, or passing through, Bihar continued to be by river. As Sinha reminds us, the Ganga was a major route for the East India Company's trade, including the annual opium fleet grandly sailing downriver from Patna and imperiously demanding unimpeded passage. Although steamboats on the Ganga preceded steam-trains by nearly three decades, they faced technical difficulties and commercial obstacles that restricted their capacity to dominate river traffic and so to displace, rather than merely reconfigure, earlier modes of transport.

Even when the railways did arrive, they tended at first to follow routes previously delineated by road and river transport and were more concerned with through traffic rather than servicing local needs. Only gradually did a reorientation of rail routes and a partial diversion of goods and passengers away from roads and rivers occur. Sinha traces both how these transitions happened and how, so far as sources allow, they impacted on the lives of little known communities like the river boatmen.

In a further essay on historiographical revisionism, Sinha remarks how colonial ideas of criminality and "criminal classes"

have almost invariably been discussed in relation to the late 19th century and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The identification of certain itinerant or mobile communities – from gosains and banjaras to fakirs and sanyasis – as dangerous and potentially criminal elements can be traced back to earlier colonial (and even precolonial) concerns about mobile groups and state control over commerce and road-use, though the author does see caste as being given an unprecedented degree of importance in the emerging colonial representation of Indian society and collective criminality. It is a pity that he does not extend this part of his analysis to consider changing colonial perceptions of pilgrims, who surely constituted one of the most significant circulatory groups and were one of the most familiar denizens of the colonial road in Bihar, as they were elsewhere in India.

In all of this, the 1820s and 1830s emerge as a more significant watershed than the 1850s, the decade of the "Indian Mutiny" and the first railway lines, though, since Sinha has little to say about 1857, it is unclear how far that momentous event (and the demise of the East India Company) affected the process of change or perceptions of the importance of creating and maintaining efficient lines of communication.

### Beyond a 'Railway-Centric' Approach

Sinha is modest about his scholarly contribution, preferring to see his task as one of bringing several different strands of scholarly discussion – travel-writing, colonial knowledge, the itinerant nature of Indian empires, criminality and, above all, transport – into dialogue with one another. There is perhaps a sense in which these remain separate strands of analysis and do not successfully combine to create a single line of argument beyond the revisionist ambition to progress beyond the "railway-centric" approach.

*Communication and Colonialism* draws extensively on the official archive, supplemented by contemporary reports, colonial travelogues and journal articles, but, such is the vastness of material discussion of the road, that there are times when significant sources appear to have

been missed. Thus, consideration of the use of convict road-gangs ends rather abruptly in the 1820s; the *Report of the Committee on Prison Discipline* in 1838 would have provided a more extended account of the rise and eventual abolition of this once widely used practice.

Sinha engages critically and illuminatingly with a number of recent scholars – Kapil Raj, Matthew Edney, Ravi Ahuja and Manu Goswami – but there are others, like Daniel Headrick, whose work he might usefully have addressed as well. While the broad claim that roads have been unduly neglected is just, the work of Jean Deloche (1993), published in English 20 years ago and noted here only in passing, contains significant material on early colonial road-building and its Mughal precedents. Nonetheless, this is a significant, constructive and imaginative attempt, not just to establish the historical importance of road and river transport to Bihar, but also to think laterally about communications and how its history intersects with other colonial power/knowledge thematics.

The book should encourage readers to think critically about the road as social nexus and political site (and not just as an instrument of economic growth) over a longer period of time, extending into the 1950s and beyond, and even to see the road revolution brought about by motor transport in the 1920s and 1930s as a further projection of what happened in places like Bihar a century earlier. If Sinha's book, and a growing body of scholarship addressing similar regions and like-minded topics, can transform the study of communications and transport in India in this way, then *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India* will surely prove to have been a highly original and pioneering work.

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