

Abstract

The railways, a colonial legacy seems to have played a great role in the spatial and temporal transformation of the Indian subcontinent and this transformation has been captured by the narrative rhetoric in fiction. Today perhaps the railways are taken as a given, but historically they are a construction of the imagination and technology. This historical development of transformation perhaps can be traced through three different types of construction, firstly, technological construction of the railways, secondly, construction of a literary genre called the railway novel in the Indian subcontinent right from the nineteenth century to post-modern fiction and thirdly, a cultural entity called India which is constructed every day by the railway and the immense changes that it makes through the notion of a oneness that comes about on the train.

The railway was considered as modernity's engine of change that was brought to India by the British with the rhetoric of colonial modernity during the nineteenth century and the novel in its present modern form seems to have emerged in the same time period. During the nineteenth century the world witnessed unprecedented transformations such as imaginative and successful exploitation of new technologies, fast forwarded industrialization, which in turn got accelerated by the ever growing railways that transported goods and passengers in such speed unimaginable till that time. For those who did use them, the railways facilitated travel in a previously unimaginable way and thus they transformed the imagination of space and time by drastically reducing the time and therefore the perception of distance it took to travel between two places. The social and cultural impacts of the new mode of travel found its way into various works of literary art like short stories, poems, novels, etc. In each instance, the figure of the train emerged as a complex narrative form engaged in by artists, creating a new genre called railroad literature, railway novel, railway stories etc.

People reacted differently in different countries when they encountered the engines of speed; for example, one depiction of the effects of the railways was ‘the annihilation of space through time’. This was because a given spatial distance, traditionally covered in a fixed amount of travel time, could suddenly be dealt with in a fraction of that time. This in turn produced the effect of shrunk or annihilated space as the same space travelled was not experienced by the travellers as before, at a lesser speed.

The concept of time and space appears to be a rather complicated subject as they were experienced by all in different manners and there seems to be no consensus on how one perceives time and space. Temporal and spatial practices and perceptions that existed before the railways and the same transformed or altered after the railways, seem to be represented in the railway novels that deal with the railways as plot devices, background scenes or as symbolic purposes. The customs and practices of the people during the time and space of the initial days of the railways seem to have altered, with the railways influencing and altering some such perceptions. Events like partition of the subcontinent which is shared both by trains with active participation in the events, and novels by representing its told and untold miseries, both in a way seem to be fictional.

The caste system, partition violence, women’s liberation, child widows, and many issues as prevailing in society are presented realistically in many of the railway novels, and the railways seem to have somehow connected and functioned as a kind of an agent of transformation by providing a space for all the issues to evolve and be sorted out. Railway stations and carriages are considered as the microcosm of Indian society with all its diversity gathered together in one place as people and parcels, for circulation around the vast country. The railway functions in its

various roles as social equalizer, engines of change and progress, liberator and many more as represented in fiction. A railway compartment seems to be able to unify fragmented territories, castes and religions into a homogeneous nation called India and helps in its nation building as the railway does not seem to distinguish between castes and tribes.

With more than one hundred and fifty years of history as a colonial enterprise, the railways in India have one of the most fascinating stories. India and Indian railways hold much to be explored and exposed that could be intriguing and interesting as material for constructing many more novels as ‘no railroads, no India? Perhaps—or at least a very different India (Kerr 179) it would have been. This study is an effort to trace the technology, and its influence on human perceptions through select railway novels.