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Railway Time and Everyday Life: How the Clock Changed Colonial India

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative impact of railway time on colonial India, highlighting how the introduction of standardized timekeeping reshaped social, cultural, religious, and political life. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Indian society relied on diverse and locally rooted temporalities, measured through natural cycles, rituals, and community practices. The advent of the railways, with their demand for punctuality and synchronization, imposed a uniform regime of mechanical time, unsettling these plural rhythms. The clock became a symbol of modernity, discipline, and colonial authority, while also generating confusion, resistance, and adaptation. Railway time regulated labor in factories, restructured religious practices, and served as a marker of racial difference, yet it was also appropriated by Indian reformers and nationalists as a tool for self-discipline and collective struggle. The study argues that railway time was not merely a technical innovation but a profound cultural encounter, producing a hybrid temporality where mechanical and cosmic rhythms coexisted. In this sense, the history of railway time reveals how modernity entered everyday life in India through hours and minutes, leaving enduring legacies of negotiation between empire and society.

Keywords

Railway time; colonial India; temporality; clock; modernity; cultural change; labor discipline; religious practice; nationalism; hybrid temporality

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When the British introduced railways in India in the mid-nineteenth century, they envisioned them as engines of commerce, conquest, and control. The railway lines that snaked across the subcontinent carried cotton and grain, troops and officials, and in the process stitched together distant regions into a new geography of empire. But the impact of the railway was not confined to space alone; it profoundly altered time. The trains required schedules, and schedules required standardized hours. Railway time emerged as a new regime of temporality, and with it the mechanical clock acquired unprecedented authority over daily life. For centuries, Indian society had measured time through the rhythms of the sun, the moon, and the seasons, through the ringing of temple bells and the calls of the muezzin, through the tasks of ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and festivals. These rhythms were flexible, local, and multiple. With the arrival of railways and their rigid timetables, time was reconfigured into something uniform, mechanical, and inescapably colonial. To trace the history of railway time in India is to trace how modernity entered not only landscapes but consciousness, how the tick of the clock replaced the cycle of the seasons, and how Indians negotiated, resisted, and reimagined this new order of hours.

Before the railways, time in India was diverse. Every region and community had its own calendars and methods of reckoning. The Hindu calendar calculated months by lunar cycles, while Muslim communities followed the Islamic lunar calendar, and many regions maintained local variations of solar calendars. Days were divided not into fixed hours but into ghatis and paharas, units that varied with the length of daylight. Villages relied on natural signs—the crowing of cocks, the position of the sun, the shadows of trees—to organize work. Bells in temples marked the morning puja, conches signaled evening worship, and the azaan from mosques punctuated the day. Markets opened with sunrise and closed at dusk. Time was thus heterogeneous, fluid, and embodied in sound and ritual rather than in mechanical devices.

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The British were unsettled by this multiplicity. For an empire that prized punctuality, efficiency, and synchronization, the Indian diversity of times was confusing. The railways, which began in the 1850s, forced the issue. To run trains safely and efficiently required strict timetables. Trains could not operate on approximate times measured by shadows or bells. A uniform railway time had to be imposed, based on the meridian of a chosen city. At first, each presidency—Bombay, Calcutta, Madras—adopted its own railway time. This meant that Bombay trains ran on Bombay time, while Calcutta trains followed Calcutta time, often half an hour different. The confusion was notorious. A passenger traveling across regions had to adjust watches, and local populations were bewildered when railway stations announced times that differed from the town clock. By the late nineteenth century, Indian Standard Time was created, based on the 82.5°E meridian near Allahabad. In 1906, this became official for the whole country.

Railway time, however, was not easily accepted. Villagers still lived by the rhythms of sunrise and sunset, and urban populations resented the imposition of a foreign system. In Calcutta, the municipal clock tower continued to follow local time even after the railways adopted standard time, leading to perpetual confusion. People joked about “railway time” and “Calcutta time,” and many refused to reset their personal watches. In Bombay, too, dual clocks were common, with one dial showing local time and another showing railway time. These contradictions reveal that time was not simply technical but cultural. The British sought to impose homogeneity, while Indians clung to plurality.

The introduction of the clock into everyday life was one of the most intimate changes wrought by colonial modernity. Clocks were expensive and rare in the early nineteenth century, owned by princes and wealthy merchants. With the railways and the need for punctuality, clocks became more widespread. Municipalities erected clock towers in public squares. Railway stations featured large clocks prominently

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above entrances, visible to all. Cheap pocket watches, imported from Europe, began to be sold in bazaars. By the early twentieth century, even middle-class families aspired to own a clock, which became a symbol of respectability and modernity. Schoolchildren were taught to read the clock, and punctuality was celebrated as a virtue. Thus, the railway did not merely move people through space but disciplined them through time.

For laborers and peasants, railway time introduced new forms of work discipline. Factories linked to railway networks demanded workers to arrive at fixed hours, unlike traditional crafts that allowed flexible rhythms. Railway workshops in places like Jamalpur and Ajmer ran on strict time schedules, with whistles marking the beginning and end of shifts. This mechanical regulation was alien to many Indian workers, who had long been accustomed to seasonal and task-oriented labor. Complaints of overwork and exhaustion often reflected not just the intensity of labor but the alien imposition of clock time. Workers struggled to reconcile their bodies, accustomed to cycles of rest and work tied to nature, with the relentless ticking of mechanical hours.

Religious life, too, was reshaped. The azaan, traditionally called when the sun reached certain positions, began to be aligned with clock time in urban areas. Temple bells were rung according to fixed hours rather than natural cycles. Calendars were printed with railway schedules, blending sacred and secular time. Some reformers embraced this synchronization, seeing it as a way to modernize religion. Others lamented the loss of cosmic rhythms. The debate revealed deeper anxieties about the relationship between tradition and modernity, between divine time and mechanical time.

The politics of railway time was also racial. The British prided themselves on punctuality and used it as a marker of superiority over Indians, whom they stereotyped as lazy or careless with time. Colonial writings mocked the “Indian

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stretchable time" and contrasted it with the discipline of the Englishman's watch. Yet Indians appropriated the clock in their own ways. Nationalist leaders like Tilak and Gandhi urged people to value time as a resource for discipline and struggle. Gandhi insisted on strict punctuality in his ashrams, making timekeeping a moral practice. Thus, railway time, once imposed as colonial control, was reinterpreted as a tool of self-discipline and national regeneration.

The cultural encounter with railway time produced humor and resistance. Folk tales spoke of villagers missing trains because they did not believe in the clock. Jokes circulated about trains leaving before passengers finished their meals, a violation of Indian hospitality. At the same time, popular songs celebrated the speed of trains and the new worlds they opened. Time became a theme in literature. Novels described the anxiety of catching trains, the clash between timeless rural life and punctual urban schedules. Poets used the ticking clock as a metaphor for modern alienation. The clock entered Indian imagination not just as a device but as a symbol of change.

Railway time also reshaped memory. Families began to recall events in terms of clock hours rather than natural signs. A birth or death was remembered as occurring at "five o'clock" rather than "when the sun was setting." Diaries and newspapers adopted clock time, spreading its authority. The very experience of the day changed, as people became conscious of hours, minutes, and schedules in new ways. Popular speech absorbed this change, as phrases like "railway time," "late by five minutes," or "on the dot" entered multiple Indian languages.

Yet the tension between railway time and local rhythms never disappeared. Even today, villages continue to organize festivals and agricultural work by lunar calendars and seasonal signs, while trains run by Indian Standard Time. This coexistence of multiple times is a legacy of the colonial encounter. The railway imposed uniformity but could not erase plurality. Indians learned to live in both

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registers, adjusting watches for trains while still honoring bells, conches, and stars. The result was a hybrid temporality, in which mechanical and cosmic time coexisted.

The impact of railway time on colonial India was thus far more than technical. It was cultural, social, and political. It changed how people worked, worshipped, remembered, and imagined. It disciplined bodies and restructured consciousness. It became a field of racial hierarchy and nationalist reform. Above all, it revealed that time is never neutral. Time is power, and in colonial India, the tick of the railway clock was a sound of empire. But it was also, in the end, appropriated into the rhythms of Indian life, transformed into a resource for new identities and struggles. The story of railway time is the story of how modernity entered Indian society through hours and minutes, how the everyday act of glancing at a clock became entangled with the larger histories of empire, resistance, and change.

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