

Journeys and Internal Migrant Workers: A Report on Railway Connectivity

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The proposed study aims to foreground the ‘journeys’ that India’s migrant workers undertake between their place of origin/ home to their destination/place of work. Studies on India’s migrant workers have mostly focussed on studying the causes of distress migration, occupational choices of migrant workers, the gendered nature of internal migration, specially invisibilizing the migration of women as workers independent of marriage or family or as dependants and access to social welfare in places of work, especially wages, health care, food, and housing. Two sites have emerged critical in the scholarship across social science disciplines – the place of origin and place of arrival/ transit/ destination. Trains have played an important role in the post-colonial infrastructure of the Indian subcontinent and also cross-border travel. Samjhauta Express and Thar Express connected India and Pakistan. And on the Eastern side of the border Maitryee Express, Bandhan Express, and Mitali Express continue to run in India and Bangladesh. According to the portal of Indian Railways it is the largest rail network in Asia and world’s second largest. Despite the significance of railways in the history of mobility, it remains under-examined in migration studies beyond quantitative assessments of the number of passengers in trains especially during the pandemic or its critical role in the arrival narratives to destination.

Yet the horrifying images that we woke up to in the wake of the lockdown in March 2020 showed us that the right to return is closely tied to the infrastructure and logistics of “return.” India’s migrant workers reached train stations and bus terminuses in the hope of finding means to return. On 1 May 2020, the Indian Railways introduced “Shramik Trains,” meaning trains for laborers to ensure safe passage, such as the return of migrant workers and other stranded passengers. Simpreet Singh (2020), in a map of Shramik Special Trains that left Mumbai, observes that the destination of these trains was a clear indicator of the place of origin of internal migrants. Singh reports that according to the Government of Maharashtra, around 426 trains left various stations in Maharashtra and reportedly transported 600000 people from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, Lokmanya Tilak Terminus in Kurla, Bandra, and Borivali Terminus. According to Singh (2020), “More than half of the passengers (373,287) and an equal proportion of trains (245) that left from Mumbai headed to Uttar Pradesh. About one-fifth of the passengers (131,283) and one-fifth of the trains (86) had Bihar as their destination”¹. In a debate in Lok Sabha in September 2020, the Railway Ministry reported that 97

¹ Singh, Simpreet. 2020. “ This map shows where Mumbai’s migrant workers headed after trains finally started again”, <https://scroll.in/article/969350/this-map-shows-where-mumbais-migrant-workers-headed-after-trains-finally-started-again>; Accessed on 1 December 2022.

people had tied on Shramik trains, and most mortem reports indicate prior ailments (TOI, 2020)². According to news reports in June 2021, more than 8700 people died on railway tracks, of which many were migrants. The railway board revealed this data in response to a query posed by a Right to Information Activist from Madhya Pradesh, Chandra Sekhar Gaur. The Railway board reported 8733 persons died on railway tracks between January 2020 and December 2020³. While the fatalities on railway tracks in 2020 were far lesser compared to previous years, many of these deaths also coincided with the first phase and second phases of the lockdown, which lasted between March 25, 2020, and April 14, 2020 which was further extended till May 3, 2020. During the first nationwide lockdown, apart from the freight trains or popularly known as goods trains, all other passenger services were nonfunctional till the announcement of Shramik trains on May 1, 2020⁴. On March 26, the entire world woke up to horrifying images of migrant workers taking the highways, walking down, trying to reach homes miles away from their places of work – the cities. On March 26, Nirmala Sitharam, Finance Minister, Government of India announced a new scheme “Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana (PMGKBY) to address the economic distress” and subsequently on May 14 as part of the Atmanirbhar (Self-reliant) package, Finance Minister made provision for “free food grain supply to migrants for 2 months’ worth of Rs 3,500 crore and special liquidity scheme to provide Rs 10,000 working capital to 50 lakh street vendors at Rs 5,000 crore”⁵. Despite these interim measures, the migrant workers attempted to return home on foot or hired private vehicles or state-run buses. Visuals of migrants walking on railway tracks widely circulated across print and visual media. And on May 8, 2020 sixteen migrant laborers from Madhya Pradesh were run over on railway tracks in Maharashtra. Fourteen of them reportedly died on the spot and two of them sustained injuries. They were trying to walk to Bhuswal to board Shramik Special bound for Madhya Pradesh They had already walked a distance of 40 kilometers and probably had slept on the tracks due to exhaustion. According to newspaper reports, they used the road to Badnapur and then switched to railway tracks⁶. Commenting on migrant workers’ deaths on railway tracks, a railway board official observed that probably the migrant workers

² ‘97 died in Shramik special trains run during lockdown’, Times of India, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/78158405.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst; Accessed on 1 December 2022.

³ “Covid-19 India timeline: Looking back at pandemic-induced lockdown and how the country is coping with the crisis”, NDTV June 2, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/railways-8-700-people-died-on-tracks-in-2020-despite-reduced-passenger-train-services-2454739>; Accessed on 1 December 2022

⁴. ibid

⁵ “Covid-19 India timeline: Looking back at pandemic-induced lockdown and how the country is coping with the crisis”, *Indian Express*, March 23, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/covid-19-india-timeline-looking-back-at-pandemic-induced-lockdown-7241583/>; Accessed on 1 December 2022.

⁶ “Aurangabad train accident: 16 migrant workers run over, probe ordered”, *The Indian Express*, May 8, 2020 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-lockdown-maharashtra-aurangabad-migrant-workers-killed-train-6399556/>; Accessed on 1 December 2022.

preferred railway tracks as these were considered shorter than highways. These deaths were also classified as deaths due to “trespassing” rather than “railway accidents”⁷. Irrespective of the classificatory terms of the Indian Railways, we see a clear need to revisit the relationship between the machine of post-colonial modernity and India’s internal migrant workers. The lessons from the pandemic inform the inquiry and research question of the proposed research. In this proposed project I want to understand how migrant workers experience journeys. Journeys, as I propose to show, are the bridge between the place of origin and work, between home and destination/s and between homes. How does the migrant worker view the train, station, time spent to reach the railway station, wait for the train, reach the destination, and distance between the destination station and place of work? Taking a cue from one of the oft used phrases in the logistics literature of India – last mile connectivity one of the important questions that could be mapped from this research is to work towards resolving the age-old conundrum – How to make the last mile accessible? A study of relevance, meaning of trains, and train networks in the lives of India’s migrant workers will be critical to the understanding of time and speed – two thematics that remain central to railway connectivity and train journeys.

How do migrants associate with trains and train journeys? How do India’s internal migrant workers view railway compartments and the introduction of digitized facilities in Indian railways? These questions are particularly significant as trains specially Shramik (literally meaning Labour) Trains were introduced on 1 May 2020 to take migrants ‘home’. How did migrant workers view these trains? During the pandemic, I was helping Domestic workers collective to organize rations. One of my respondents from earlier fieldwork heard about this initiative and contacted me. When I asked her if she was planning to take Shramik Trains, she responded, ‘Why do they need to call us that? We know we are unwanted. Now they want us to go homes. What will we feed?’. Maya (name changed here), a part time domestic worker observed ‘many people are leaving... If it comes to that, I will book myself and my children a spot in the car’. When I told her about Shramik Trains, she said her children won’t be able to endure the journey. They are used to a certain life. She disclosed that was their reward after schools closed. They would wait to enjoy an eighteen-hour journey in an air-conditioned compartment where food would arrive in regular intervals. Maya didn’t want to disclose this and I sensed her hesitation the moment she said change my name when you write this. But I want you to write so that ‘they know we have dreams.’ I have never quite figured how to read into these stories of arrival and fear of returning home I was collecting during the pandemic with migrant workers. What became

⁷ “Over 8,700 people died on tracks in 2020 lockdown — many of them were migrants”, Indian Express, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/over-8700-people-died-on-tracks-in-2020-lockdown-many-of-them-were-migrants-7341473/>; Accessed on 1 December 2022.

imminent was the need to study ‘circular’ nature of migration and a need to find out a site that was beyond place of origin, destination, place of work and home. What was happening in between? How do I study in between?

Train, for me, is the site that informs an important site to study this ‘in-between.’ I would not be quick to be drawn into Maya’s narrative of dreams, but her statement does point to a need to study how do people associate mobility with speed, technology? While the technocratic state is reimagining India’s railway networks by introducing new super-fast trains, vista dome coaches, digital food delivery services, how are migrant workers coping with the changing rubrics of technology?

Scholars working on migration in Bihar, specially Pushpendra Kumar and Manish Jha, in their “From Kosi to Delhi: Life and Labour of Migrants,” have pointed out ‘trains originating from or passing through the Kosi region bound to Delhi, Jammu, Punjab, Gujarat, and Maharashtra are common now. Better transport links have enhanced migration volume and provided much-needed elasticity of labour supply to far-flung places’⁸.

But how do we historicize the introduction of train networks and infrastructure in Bihar? As of now, I propose to study how at the heart of the Indian railway network - an emblem of colonising mission and vision recognized the plight of the migrant workers. In 2006 the then Railway Minister of the Government of India- Mr. Lalu Prasad Yadav, introduced a train named Garib Rath / Chariot of the poor. The first Garib Rath connected Saharsha in Bihar to Amritsar.

I propose to prepare this report on the basis of fieldwork for five months on one of the longest train routes from Bihar to Mumbai. Bhagalpur Lokmanya Tilak Express is a superfast train. The train covers a distance of 1911 kilometers over 32 hours and 50 minutes. It halts at 35 stations in the three states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and several other places in Maharashtra before it reaches Mumbai. The train has nine sleeper coaches, three general compartments, and seven air-conditioned coaches. I propose to conduct fieldwork in sleeper coaches and general compartments across this train route to follow migrant workers’ experiences of trains and train journeys. I hope this will allow me to study migrant workers across and beyond the categories – seasonal, circular, and distress migrants.

In my recce field visit in December 2020 when I undertook a recce visit I managed to conduct interviews with tailors, transport workers (ranging from auto drivers and cab drivers). As part of my recce fieldwork in December 2022, I realized that given the private nature of railway journeys and shorter duration, one can undertake up to 5-7 interviews per journey.

⁸ Pushpendra Kumar and Manish Jha. 2018. “From Kosi to Delhi : Life and Labour of Migrants” in *Migrants and the Neoliberal City*. Edited by Ranabir Samaddar. Delhi : Orient Blackswan.

As part of this study, I plan to conduct at least 60 interviews with our co-travelers who identify as migrant workers/ pravashi shramik. The rationale for conducting 60 interviews is based on the number of berths available in a “sleeper class” compartment. To do so, it is important to undertake at least six railway journeys from March to October. The focus of the interviews across gender and caste would be to understand their preference for trains, their observation on the increase in prices of train tickets, train routes, their experience of journeys over the years, challenges with harsh weather conditions, access to food, drinking water, toilets, and distance of railway station from their place of work and their experience of sleeper coach/ general compartment. This fieldwork will inform the migrant workers’ struggle with last-mile connectivity and show how migrant workers continue to be an important source of revenue for the Indian Railways – a thematic often missing from the existing public discourse on trains. Apart from in-depth interviews with migrant workers in the Sleeper Class compartment, I will design a survey to understand migrant workers who travel in the “General Compartment” to map their experience of the journeys. The survey will be conducted at Bhagalpur and Mumbai Railway station.