
BOOK REVIEW: LINES OF THE NATION: 'INDIAN RAILWAY WORKERS, BUREAUCRACY, AND THE INTIMATE HISTORICAL SELF' COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS. NEW YORK, 2007

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Lines of the Nation, written by historical anthropologist Laura Bear is very much a book of two halves, the first part is a superb archive-based history of the Eastern Railway Company and the second is an ethnographic account of a number of railway families. The first half details the emergence of this section of India's railways and the second half brings the work up to the present. Bear's archival and ethnographic research was carried out from 1993 to 1997 in both Calcutta and Kharagpur. Due to comments on the dust cover I had anticipated that this book would be more about Anglo-Indians than it is. I soon saw that, consistent with the first half being about the Eastern Railway company, the second part is an ethnography of the people who are associated with this section of the Indian railways, who were never just Anglo-Indians, but include Bengali families also.

Just as every researcher, and writer for that matter, has a particular perspective, so does a reviewer. As I write this I am in Kolkata having spent the last three months in the company of Anglo-Indians in the city, and I have also spent time in Kharagpur over this period. So it is with this particular lens, as well as my own ten year period of anthropological research and interest in the community that I have reviewed Bear's work.

Looking firstly at the Part 1, the historical narrative of the Eastern railways: a significant data source was the Eastern Railway Head Quarters in Calcutta. As Bear outlined in both this and her earlier publication, *The Jadu House: Intimate Histories of Anglo-India*, obtaining access wasn't expedited by the bureaucratic processes involved – as many academics seem to experience. Once she managed, however, she made excellent use of the material, combining in her book the personal and

official correspondence (letters and documents) with the philosophy and orthodoxy in place at the time. Because the Anglo-Indians are so closely linked to the railways this history offers a located history of Anglo-Indians also, and explains changes in attitude towards the community from the British colonial powers in particular.

In chapter one Bear sets the scene (politically, economically and socially) within which the construction of the Indian railways occurred. Bear shows how the prevailing theories linking morality, climate, medical processes and social stratification were complex and overlapping, and guided British decision-makers in how to proceed with their newly acquired territory. The 'problem' of morality's link to climate (that the hot climates of India were conducive to a decrease in morality) was solved, for example, by developing hill station railway branches (the cooler climate being thought to be more conducive to 'moral' behaviour). Other solutions to local problems included attracting middle class Britishers to India, and educating the Domiciled Europeans and Eurasians – as Anglo-Indians were referred to at the time.

In chapter two Bear traces the trajectory of thinking about the physical space of railway stations and grounds immediately adjacent to the stations. While they were initially seen as potential forts, which could be used as such in case of internal problems and challenges to the colonial presence, they transitioned to being something quite new to India – public spaces where people of all walks of life could move freely. Of course Indian social norms required that social distinctions (separating those of different caste, creed, class and gender, for example) also needed to be accommodated in some ways, so different types of carriages were available on the trains. Bear describes and explains these developments and adjustments well noting, for example, that in a country where distance and purdah were required to maintain respectability of females, provision was made for women-only carriages (something that remains today in most forms of public transport).

Chapter three looks at the development of the railway colonies and notes that their establishment placed these workers under the scrutiny of their employees – in and out of work hours. This was achieved by erecting housing and recreational buildings in one large site so that railway employees lived, played, worshipped and were schooled together with their families. She notes also that the British architecture of the buildings and their layout encouraged the mainly Anglo-Indian workers to live

British lifestyles, rather than being influenced by Hindu and Muslim neighbours. The science of the time indicated that air and good ventilation produced good morality and 'proper' ways of life. She draws on the 'scientific' thinking of the time to explain how, for example, racial science led to stereotyping based on race and the distinctions in how the different social groups were regarded.

In chapter 4 she moves into the territory of nationalism, discussing amongst other things, the raising in national consciousness of Swadesi ideals, and of union activity, and how this impacted on Anglo-Indians, Christians and Domiciled Europeans in particular during the period from 1870s onwards. In chapter 5, through a close examination of petitions from workers to their employees, Bear highlights the impact upon the railway workers, Anglo-Indians and others, of various policies in place. In chapter 6, the last in Part I, she looks at the rise in the significance of public genealogies as a result of a focus on 'race'. She notes that from the 1890s, for example, the Indian National Congress campaigned against race-based inequalities in pay and by 1924 the railways ruled that divisions of pay by race be abolished. This focus on race led to questions about how to determine race, which understandably was of growing concern for Anglo-Indians, who were unable to fit easily into categories of Indian, or of European, but were varied combinations of the two groups.

In Part 2, Bear moves into the ethnographic section, segueing effectively from the discussion in the previous chapter on origins, bloodlines, and communal belonging, into the particularities of individual's lives. As Bear indicates in her introduction, one of the central foci of the ethnographic account are the various families' pursuit of documentation as proof of family histories, arguing that railway Anglo-Indians were privileged in their ability to provide such proof. In chapter 7, the first chapter of this section she introduces the research participants whose lives and experiences she draws from. It is not clear whether or not she used pseudonyms. I presumed she did, that being the usual practice for anthropologists. Since I was in Calcutta and Kharagpur as I was reading this work I was in a position to check with some locals and satisfied myself that she did use pseudonyms – if sometimes rather thin disguises of her participants.

There is a distinct change of pace and style in this section. Bear writes beautifully: in

the first part with scholarship and authority, and in much of the second with beautifully evocative imagery. Through the early chapters in Part 2 she captures the detail of the material life of her participants with descriptions of their dwellings, for example: their altars, portraits, living spaces, and decor. The lives, events, incidents, and confidences she describes focus mainly on Anglo-Indians, although Bengalis, and their views are evident also. She integrates these intimate glimpses with traditional anthropological foci such as discussions of kinship, and lineage.

The archive is still a focus in Part 2, but in this case it's the personal archive. She gives the impression of a people absorbed by the paper chase; the pursuit of personal documents and certificates of 'proof'. An example she uses in Chapter 8 concerns Paul Mantosh, a former 'M.L.A.' whose story of pursuing 'proof' of being Anglo-Indian she reported. This was an unfortunate example to use because of the inaccuracies within the story itself, including that fact that this was a former M.P, not an M.L.A. I understand that this will be withdrawn in further editions.

Chapter 9, titled 'Railway morality', exemplifies a tension between whether this work is an ethnography of Anglo-Indians or of railway people (which happen to include Anglo-Indians). Within this chapter is a solidly researched post-Independence history which makes sense of the situations in Calcutta and Kharagpur. But perhaps because I'm in Calcutta, amongst Anglo-Indians, my sense is that in this chapter Bear is increasingly allowing her Bengali research participants undue space to criticise Anglo-Indians and their lifestyle – with little critical authorial commentary. A few words about Bengali lack of understanding of the Anglo-Indian worldview, lack of appreciation that 'culture' comes in many forms (including Christian attributes), would have been more balanced, scholarly, and fairer to Anglo-Indians.

Another traditional anthropological focus; that of social stratification, is treated in a puzzling way in respect of Anglo-Indians; they are referred to as a railway caste. This appears to be an invented term bearing no legitimacy in the Hindi caste system, and therefore could be quite misleading and possibly offensive to Anglo-Indians who are Christian. The term 'jati' occurs throughout her work, along with her reference to Anglo-Indians as the railway 'caste'. There is a problem with the logic of concluding that the people you've selected *because* of their railway connection are proof of their status as this occupational group. Anglo-Indians have been central to the railways

but the railways were not central to being Anglo-Indian: Anglo-Indians were strongly represented in all the civil and military services, as well as in teaching, secretarial positions, nursing, and now call centres, I.T., hospitality and so much more. Would one then conclude that they are also teaching, nursing, and call centre etc. castes?

Contemporary anthropological works generally include a reflection from the researcher as relevant to the research and the communities focused upon. Consequently I would have liked to have seen more of Bear in the work, in relation to the research. She does reveal that she told her participants about her 'husband from the Ivory Coast', but doesn't indicate that later Bengali influences were discussed with them. Details of this she provides in *The Jadu House: Intimate Histories of Anglo-India*, so it is possible to fill in some blanks. On the personal nature of the work there's an interesting trajectory to the book, which perhaps mirrors Bear's experience of the research. She's British, comes to India, mixes with many – Anglo-Indians and others, and then marries a Bengali man she met in Calcutta while conducting her research. In her work she commences with a colonial British perspective, looks then at the effect upon others (Anglo-Indian, Christian, domiciled European and other Indian groups) and ends with an increasingly Bengali centred perspective. One wonders what sort of book she might have written if she had not been introduced to Kharagpur's Anglo-Indians by Ahmed, and been involved with her future husband while carrying out the research.

Apart from the above reservations the meticulous history of the railways of Eastern India and detailed ethnographic material in this work make it one of the best records of certain sections of the Anglo-Indian community I have come across. It's a new approach, centralising Anglo-Indians from a railway perspective.

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