POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RAILWAYS IN BRITISH INDIA, 1850-1900

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Historiography of the 19th century India is replete with lively debates on several aspects of the colonial economic policy such as *Laissez faire*, Free Trade, De-Industrialization, Land Tax, Economic Drain, etc. The railroad was one such issue that engaged the minds of the contemporary commentators, British civil servants, Indian Nationalist thinkers and the later-day academicians.[1] Broadly speaking they can be classified into two categories: Critics and Admirers.[2]

According to the Critics, the interests of the Indian economy were deliberately subordinated to those of the Imperial Britain, with the result that the Indian economy was left stagnating. As Indian handicraft industry—especially the Handloom Industry—succumbed to the onslaughts of the technologically advanced Metropolitan Nations of the

[1] The latest debate has been opened by Prof. M. D. Morris with his celebrated article, "Towards a reinterpretation of nineteenth century Indian economic history", *Journal of Economic History* (JEH), Dec. 1963. It provoked a very stimulating discussion by Professors Tour Matsui, Bipan Chandra and Tapan Ray Chaudhuri in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (IESHR) Vol. V, No. 1, 1968. Also see Prof. M. D. Morris' lengthy reply to his critics, "Trends and Tendencies in Indian Economic History", *IESHR*, Vol. V, No. 4, Dec. 1968, pp. 319-88.

[2] Our category of 'Critics' includes not only the nationalists like Romesh Chandra Dutt, Dadabhoy Naoroji and Subramania Iyer, but also the British Civil servants such as Sir Arthur Cotton, William Digby and the twentieth century academicians, Daniel Thorner, Leland Jenks, B. M. Bhatia, Bipan Chandra, Irfan Habib, T. Ray Chaudhuri and Toru Matsui. By 'Admirers' we mean those who by and large, highlighted only the positive impact of the British policies on the Indian economy. This category includes Strachey brothers, Buchanan, Percival Griffiths and the twentieth century writers like Lilian Knowles, Vera Anstey, W. J. Macpherson and in a way M. D. Morris. Not all of them consciously 'justified' the British policies. But to them the broad objectives of the British *Raj* in India was 'welfare' of the Indian people. Prof. Morris seems to be deliberately aggressive, of late, in 'refuting' Critics' arguments. According to Morris the British *Raj* saw itself in the passive role of *'a night watchman'*! It is amusing to see the way he even posits the debate. According to him the point of controversy between the two schools of thought was the ".... attempt to explain why, *despite* a century and half of British rule, India remained incredibly poor"! (emphasis mine). See *Explorations in Economic History* (Morris' introduction to the Symposium) 12, 1975, pp. 253-61. The Critics would, I presume, readily retort saying, "India was poor not *despite* but *because* of a century and half of British rule"!