

**Railway Administrative Management during Bengal Partition**  
Sudipta Sardar<sup>1</sup>

**<sup>1</sup>Vice Principal**  
**Rabindra Bharati Mahavidyalaya**  
**Kolaghat,purba Medenipur,West Bengal**  
**Email:profsudipta.history@gmail.com**

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***Abstract:** Partition of Bengal was a turning point of Bengal in terms of administrative control and its development during the first decade of twentieth century. Historians saw partition as a divide and rule policy and their view point's gets perfectly justified by the existing documents and historical evidences where the colonial government time and again stressed over the fact that the geographical space of undivided Bengal was so huge to exercise effective governance. However many saw it as a degradation of Bengal province and by dividing Bengal the colonial government broke the unity of the province and made it weaker for their own profit. Whatever might be the outcome of the event but one significant thing that these historians have neglected by overly focusing on the partition event and its consequences was the railways administrative growth and its consequent effort of centralizing the management board for smooth and better performances. For the first time there was a formation of an autonomous Railway Board, there was establishment of several different posts for that purpose. Not only that, the crucial role played by railways behind the growth of Bengal was also neglected, the mainstream historians seemed to have overlooked the fact that it was because of the railways that the partition was possible. All such things had not been given proper importance and mention by the historians.*

***Keywords:** Assam Bengal Railway ,Development, Establishments, Overlook, Partition etc.*

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**Introduction**

The partition of Bengal took place in the wake of twentieth century, to be specific in the year 1905. This was the first major partition that was propelled and initiated on the grounds of

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## Railway Administrative Management During Bengal Partition

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exercising adequate rule and management. It needed to be mentioned that, the undivided Bengal was so large for the Britishers to control and rule with a single body of authority hence they wanted partition. And hence Bengal partition was a divide and rule politics. On October 16, 1905, Dhaka became the capital of the newly-created province of East Bengal and Assam, in the wake of what is known as the Partition of Bengal (1905–1911). Although the stated aim of the partition was administrative efficiency on the part of the colonial rulers, Governor-General of India George Nathaniel Curzon (1899-1905) sought to achieve political goals by dividing Bengal. He had hoped that the political autonomy of the Muslims of East Bengal would counterbalance the growing power of the Hindus of West Bengal.<sup>1</sup> But the major outcome of such an event was very stark and gloomy, everything was uncertain at that moment. There was not any proper demarcation of lands; there was unrest between the people. All such things had been well observed and noticed by several scholars and there had been numerous studies done on the cause and effects of Bengal partition.

The majority of the scholars found several loopholes of that event and criticized the British government's intention which made a lot of people to suffer unwontedly. The partition of Bengal in 1905 represents a divide in Indian history for several reasons.<sup>2</sup> However one thing that was sidelined during that event, which was very much ignored by the mainstream historians and scholars, was the development of the railway management. When the partition was put into effect, states were created and separated with a dividing policy but railways were seen to be centralizing. Railways were brought under the same flag with unison of authority and creation of a separate board for railway management for its smooth hassle free workings. The unison of the railway board was not the only development, the railway management authorities were improved, new posts were created, several recruitments took place and in terms of infrastructure lot of development was initiated. Scholar Mohammad Shah's account we also found the mention that many feeder roads and railways were constructed and steamer services opened in 1905.<sup>3</sup>

The partition of 1905 subdued the railways and therefore not many historians focused on the development of railways during that phase. The shift of focus on the partition scenario denied the railway management their actual representation in terms of development. Railway Management was in a crucial phase- centralization process was going on. It needed to be mentioned that, just after the introduction of the railways Lord Dalhousie established Public Works Department, which looked after the railway management along with other social things. It was unified body of authority which took notice of other organizational aspects of the society including railways expansion and management. And in 1866, just after a decade of railways introduction in colonial India, a Railway Branch was established under Deputy Secretary. This establishment of the railway branch was specifically designed for the handling of railway activities in colonial India. This railway branch was a kind of a committee which took notice of railway construction and transactions. All such minor governing bodies and adjoins were there to look after the railway

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## Railway Administrative Management During Bengal Partition

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management system and organizational process. However these bodies of governing councils were not a proper governing board and the scattered railways across India during that colonial phase was governed by scattered body of authorities, which was at once tiresome and difficult to control by the British government. Hence the unwieldy size of the Bengal Presidency rendered its sub-division necessary.<sup>4</sup>

However, for this particular solution, for the first time a Railway Board was constituted and Public Works Department was completely abolished. This Railway Board was an autonomous and unified authority with a hierarchical structure of control. This kind of Railway Board was already in effect in the European countries which became very pivotal in for the development of railways. It needed to be mentioned that, the conception of a Railway Board was not new it had been advocated and considered on various occasions for many years past. Its central idea was that there should be a body of practical business men entrusted with full authority to manage the railways of India on commercial principles, and freed from all non-essential restrictions, or needlessly inelastic rules. In view of the great expansion that had taken place in the railway system of India, and of the necessity which had in consequence arisen for providing more powerful and efficient machinery for the rapid disposal of the increasing business, the Government of India placed before His Majesty's Secretary of State for India certain proposals for the constitution of a Railway Board, which, with some modifications, had now received his sanction.<sup>5</sup>

There were several new posts created for the managing the newly established board. Posts such as Director of Stores, Director of Traffic, Chief Accountant, Planning Adviser, were created for the management of the board. However it needed to be mentioned that Sir Thomas Robertson - Special Commissioner for Indian Railways, who was appointed in 1901, for investigating the management system of the railways, was responsible behind the creation of the Railway Board in 1905.<sup>6</sup> With this creation the railway became a separate body of organization managed by its own set of directors and officers. From then on railway establishment, recruitment, development and several other things were done by establishing proper committees for those purposes. Some of the notable committees that were formed from then on were James Mackey committee formed by the Secretary of the State in 1907, Lord Inchcape committee. These types of committees were crucial in reporting financial and administrative management reports of Indian railways.<sup>7</sup>

In 16 February 1904, Assam- Bengal Railway Company finished working on its railway lines. After finishing, Viceroy Lord Carjon inaugurated the newly established line in Chittagong. And when undivided Bengal was divided into two independent states of Assam and East Bengal, then the railways of those provinces were named as Assam Railway and Eastern Bengal Railway. Such division of railways also became for the better management of those railways. In 1905, Noakhali railways were established by a newly established company of the same name. And it was tied up or included within the Assam Bengal railway in 1st January 1906.<sup>8</sup> During the

## Railway Administrative Management During Bengal Partition

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partition phase of Bengal, the railway miles increased in India with the creation of several new lines in the undivided Bengal provinces. Assam Bengal Railways increased in terms of its profit margin by about 17 percent in 1905 in comparison with the previous year's profit. In 1904 total income of Assam Bengal Railway was 29,53,962 rupees and in the partition year of Bengal the profit increased to 34,14,295 rupees.<sup>9</sup> And according to the Factory Act Report of 1905, there was 1295 workers working in Assam and Bengal railway Construction Company.<sup>10</sup> These two railways provided job opportunities to many local and outstation habitants. Hence, the creating separate work field and its associated fields for people to earn their livelihood in several ways.

The Bengal Iron and Steel Company Limited entered into a contract with the Secretary of State for India for the manufacture of steel.<sup>11</sup> Such kind of association of a private company helped to enhance the state's developmental processes by increasing its opportunity for financial advancement with such a huge project. Hence it was seen that during the partition scenario the newly established states provided railways with raw and constructional materials needed for the construction of railways. And the increasing lines demanded a lot of constructional materials which in turn created a work tension amidst the states companies. As a consequence these companies had to hire workers for such purposes. This sort of activities also helped in the social and economical growth of those provinces. Not only that, after considering the representation given by the Indian engineers The Railway Board agreed to provide tender to these Indian engineers for the first time for the construction of wagons and railway bodies within India.<sup>12</sup> That was a huge step in terms of Indian ways of railway construction which not only reduced the amount of expenditure behind such construction but also helped in a speedy development of the railways.

Such crucial aspects of the railway development were ignored by the Bengal partition historians even after knowing the importance of the railways for the development of India. The scientific revolution, i.e., Railways was also an important aspect during Bengal partition in 1905. When partition took place, demarcation of lands and boundaries, but marking and identifying lands was not easy. Hence railways were used as an initial demarcation. Transportation through railways also played a crucial part in managing things and putting things together. It needed to be mentioned that partition was done mainly relying on the railway transport. Before the introduction of the railways the undivided Bengal was not that wealthy and even its infrastructure did not developed until railways were introduced in Bengal.

There were three major railways in Bengal, Eastern Bengal Railway, Northern Bengal State Railway and Assam Railway. These three railways provided the major basis behind the growth of undivided Bengal. Hence, it was a fact that because of the railways the financial, political and administrative perspectives of undivided Bengal changed and gave it an autonomous identity. The colonial government apprehended the fact that introduction of railways in undivided Bengal province would enrich the place, that's why they introduced railways at that place. And this

# Railway Administrative Management During Bengal Partition

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particular introduction of the railways later on became the basis or the ground on which Bengal was able to get divided. Due to the importance and growing commercial activities as well administrative developments Bengal could be divided into East Bengal and Assam, two separate and independent states.

Thus the significance behind the partition and development of the area could never be denied. But mainstream historians forgot to highlight the significance of railways behind the partition and that without railways the partition would not have taken place. Thus it was a fact that railways made the colonial ruler's partition dream possible, without railways it would not have been possible. But establishment of railways and exercising a smooth management was not easy in Bengal. It had to tackle several superstitions and obstructions also.<sup>13</sup> Ian J. Kerr pointed out that India's 26,955 route miles made it the world's fourth largest railroad network in 1905, and gave a position of fully state-owned and state-operated Indian Railways.<sup>14</sup> However it had been evident from the above discussion that, there was crucial railway management development process going on during Bengal partition, which had been overlooked by the Bengal partition historians and scholars.

## Notes and References

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<sup>14</sup>Ian J Kerr, *Engines of Change: the Railroads that Made India*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007,p.45.