

Development of Railway Transport in Colonial Orissa (1854-1936)

Dr. Ganeswar Nayak

From its beginning in 1853, Indian railway system expanded rapidly to become by 1910, the fourth largest in the world. This network, which covered most of the sub continent, radically altered India's transport system.¹ Vastly increasing the speed and availability of transport, it also cost substantially thereby permitting new opportunity for profits. Regional specialization began to occur and trade expanded. For a country of many segmented markets separated from each other by high cost of transport, India became nation with its local centers linked by rail to each other and to the world. Railway, by establishing these links, had an impact throughout Indian economy.

The railway age dawned in Orissa by the closing years of 19th century when the first train from Khurda to Bhubaneswar flagged off on 20 July 1896.² However, the history of railway development in Orissa had been a chequered one. The prospect of railway development in Orissa had been bleak for a long period of time because a politically fragmented Orissa remained under British presidency, Central Provinces and Madras Presidency. The British Orissa remained as an administrative appendage of Bengal.³ Illiteracy, ignorance of the people, economic backwardness and lack of political leadership allowed the British authority to ignore the interest of Orissa.

In 1866, Orissa was visited by a famine, which was most intense and desolating in character. That famine perished one third of its population. The famine had its brighter side too.

Because the British authority realized their folly of neglecting their Orissa possession, and now came forward for economic development of Orissa. The Bengal Orissa Famine Commission of 1867, which constituted to look into the causes of the famine recommended for the development of Roads, Ports and canals.⁴ But the Famine Commission did not recommend for the development of railway in Orissa.⁵

The people of Orissa also realized their folly of following the anti British attitude and their own apathy. They were awakened to their occasion and through newspapers and public meetings exerted mounting pressure on the British Government to start railway development in Orissa. The Utkal Sabha in 1874, under the leadership of Madhusudan Das demanded for railway development in Orissa. Similarly the Commissioner of Central Provinces submitted a proposal to the Govt. of India for extending the railway up to Sambalpur.⁶ The proposal of Chief Commissioner brought high hopes in the minds of Orissa. But the proposal did not receive sympathetic consideration from the Government.

The people of Balasore in 1881 took a leading part to mobilize public opinion for the development of railways. They formed a working committee under the presidentship of Raja Baikuntha Nath Dey and mounted pressure on the authority to extend railway from Raniganj to via Bankura - Midnapur and Balasore to Puri.⁷ But Govt. was not yet ready for such a proposal.

However, one of the potential factors contributed for the development of railway was the recommendation of Indian Famine Commission of 1881. The Commission recommended for construction of 8000 Kms. of railways in India to protect the country from famine.⁸ Besides, the parliamentary select committee of 1884 recommended for rapid extension of railways. It pointed out that it would give protection against famine, stimulate internal trade, open up fertile tracts and coalfields and in general improve economic condition of the people.⁹

Another significant factor which contribute to the development of railways in Orissa that by the dawn of 20th century the neglect in Irrigation was the product of British selfishness and deep rooted proclivity of the foreign powers to sacrifice the interest of Indian people in order to placate the interest British traders, manufacturers and investors.¹⁰

Under the pressures mounting from various quarters, the Government yielded and entrusted the Bengal Nagpur Company to construct railway line in Orissa. It was formed in 1887. For the purpose of executing the contract of taking over the existing Nagpur- Chhatishgrah railways for the purpose of constructing railroads from Nagpur to Raj Nandgaon.¹¹ On 9th March 1887 an indenture was made between the Secretary of State in the council of India and Bengal Nagpur Company Limited to carry out the contract to that effect.¹²

In November 1892 orders were issued for a detailed survey of line from Calcutta to Cuttack.¹³ The total length of the proposed railway was 300 miles. By the end of 1895 the Government of India sanctioned the construction of railway from Sini to Cuttack including the construction of a bridge over Mahanadi near Cuttack. The amount of Capital expenditure was estimated as follows.¹⁴

Table -1

Capital expenditure of different section of railways.

Railway lines	Miles	Expenditure (Rs) Cr.
Sini to Howrah via Midnapur	175	2.03
Cuttack to Midnapur	194	2.19
Rs.5.12 Crore.	454	5.12

The year 1898-99 was the most significant time for realizing the dreams of Orissa in this connection. The most vital section of railways via Sini via Kharagpur and then Kolaghat- Kharagpur -Cuttack was opened for goods as well as passengers traffic.¹⁵ Survey from Cuttack to Puri was made during 1882-83. The construction of this line was called East -Coast Railway was approved in the year 1890. While East Coast Railway was under construction from Vijaywada to Cuttack, Bengal Nagpur Railway Company was authorized to construct railway from Kharagpur to Cuttack. Bhubaneswar to Khurda section was opened in July 1896, and Cuttack - Bhubaneswar section was opened on 10 February 1897.¹⁶

A railway line from Sambalpur to Khurda was first surveyed in 1891. It was estimated that the whole line of about 190 miles of length would cost about 2.77 crore.¹⁷ But in 1894 the project was abandoned for want of funds.

Railway communication in the states of Orissa**(A) Mayurbhanja State Railway**

The opening of the narrow gauge railway line between Rupsa to Talbandh was the contribution of Maharaja Ramachandra Bhanja Deo of Mayurbhanja. The total capital expenditure on this line was 17.144 and the line was opened for traffic in 1905. The extension of this line from Baripada to Talbandh in order to explore iron ore deposits of Gurumahisani was sanctioned in 1915¹⁸ and the extended line was opened for traffic on 13th July 1920.¹⁹ After the First World

War the Government decided to explore coalfield of Talcher. The Bengal Nagpur Railway acquired the mining right over 1000 acres of Talcher coal fields areas and commenced the construction of a railway line connecting Talcher with the Cuttack - Kharagpur railway line at Nirgundi. This line was opened for traffic on 20 January 1927.²⁰

(B) Parlakhemundi Light Railway²¹

Parlakhemundi estate was largest permanently settled estate in modern Gajapati district. It came under British occupation in 1768. East Coast Railway brought its Rail line to Naupada on 20.07.1884. Naupada was traditional take off point for Parlakhemundi. The Raja of Parlakhemundi decided to construct a light railway consisting of 2 feet 6 inches gauge taking off from Naupada to connect his capital Parlakhemundi and approached the Government for sanction. The sanction was granted on 1.4.1900. The rail line was built with utmost economy, sixty miles of rail line had cost about Rs.7,00,000. In 1929-31 the Raja decided to further extension of Railway. Total capital outlay shoot up from 7 lakh to 25 lakh.

(c) Nilgiri Light Railway²²

A wealthy Bengali firm of Calcutta was proprietor of extensive granite quarries at Nilgiri. The firm decided to construct a short 2'6 gauge railway from the mines to Balasore station on the Bengal Nagpur Railway, a distance of 13 miles. First it was decided to transport only granite. It was further decided to extend the line to the heart of Orissa and convert the line for passenger and goods traffic. But the decision of the Government did not materialize and one of the beautiful projects faced its premature death. Till now this project did not receive attention of the present Government.

The opening of Bengal Nagpur Railway was a revolution in the field of communication system in Orissa. This provided indirect communication line between Calcutta and Orissa.²³ The railway development system in Orissa in the last quarter

of 19th century paved the path for political and territorial integration of the Oriya speaking tracts and heralded significant economic progress. The opening of railway contribution to the expansion of trade and exploration of the natural resources. Simultaneously, it also encouraged migration of the people from rural areas to the cities of the neighbouring provinces in search of livelihood. The introduction of railway revolutionized the life of the people and symbolized the approach of Modern Orissa.

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Dr. Ganeswar Nayak is a Lecturer in History, SKCG (Autonomous College), Parlakhemundi, Gajapati.