

Railways' Economic Impact on Uttar Pradesh and Colonial North India (1860–1914): The Iron Raj

By Ian D. Derbyshire (review). 615 pp. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.

David W. Del Testa

Department of History, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA, USA

Email: david.deltesta@bucknell.edu

Ian D. Derbyshire's *Railways' Economic Impact on Uttar Pradesh and Colonial North India: The Iron Raj* demonstrates in exquisite detail the widespread consequences of the introduction of rail transport in, specifically, the north-central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (initially the Northwest Territories, then the United Provinces) through to the end of World War I, but also points towards larger trends across India as well. In this 615-page revision of his 1985 dissertation, with over 100 maps, charts, and other illustrations, Derbyshire touches on practically every aspect of human affairs in relation to the impact of the construction, operation, and exploitation of railways, concentrating in particular on the transformation of traditional urban and rural economies and the consequence of those transformation on the vocational groups of Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, so interesting is Derbyshire's penetrating examination of the transformation of local economies in the face of the potent admixture of a transportation revolution, an extractive colonial economy, and new tastes and tendencies of the people of north-central India that the less quantitative reader might want Derbyshire to have inverted his presentation, emphasising the effects of railways on people and their livelihoods as a consequence of economic transformation.

Railways' Economic Impact on Uttar Pradesh and Colonial North consists of five parts in overlapping chronological progression, each lushly sourced and deeply researched. The book focuses on a classic question: Who did the railways benefit, and who did they hurt? Despite the subtitle, *The Iron Raj*, this book has less to do with how British colonial state used railways to control India and more to do with how Indians adapted to and took advantage of them. Derbyshire concludes that, between 1860 and 1914, despite many examples of local adjustment shocks, the people of Uttar Pradesh gained higher per-capita incomes, greater access to goods, and increased outlets for their goods, particularly the ports at Mumbai and Karachi.

Part One focuses on conditions in Uttar Pradesh before and just at the beginning of the arrival of the railways. Prior to the railways, UPites relied on carts and barges to transport goods from areas of production to areas of consumption or distribution, at high cost and with significant seasonal variation, especially in terms of river craft. Derbyshire argues that, as demand for Indian products grew in the world market, expanding canal navigation would have cost far more per ton transported than the railways that significantly supplanted them. However, the total length of the canals did increase concomitantly with the introductory period of railway construction, allowing an increase in both kinds of transport.

Part Two concerns the construction of the railways that began in the 1850s. 'Political-strategic concerns'—in particular, the 1857 Rebellion and the subsequent transfer of authority over much of India to the British Crown and its private clients—dominated planning for railways. Private companies using English capital began in the 1860s to build more commercially oriented lines—a process that accelerated in the 1870s, for two reasons: the government-general began to coordinate public–private partnerships

to avoid the ‘riot of individuality’ that occurred in early railway development in the USA and in Britain while also avoiding charges of statism; and manufacturing techniques became increasingly adapted to local conditions, materials, skill sets, and approaches to construction.

Part Three illustrates how a new economy developed, encouraged by railway construction and the ability of railways to drain products quickly to internal markets and for export, with double cropping and crop specialisation being important factors in a rural economy transformation. For example, between 1881 and 1921, the demand for boatmen and carters fell by 80 per cent and 83 per cent, respectively. Different castes took advantage of new opportunities offered by the railways, including as builders or as wholesalers. Rather than retaining important grain stocks against famine, rural farming families increasingly released their excess grain onto the market because the railways ensured that they could import grain from outside of their particular region in times of dearth. Farmers and creditors benefitted the most from this transformed economy, but Derbyshire argues that the inability to concentrate land holdings and a lack of capital to invest in the improvement of individuals’ farms limited growth. He does not address the environmental consequences of railway construction and economic adjustment extensively, but hints at subsequent damage.

Part Four illustrates the transformation of urban life away from river ports towards railway centres. Here, Derbyshire marks Uttar Pradesh as both consistent with the rest of India and anomalous, as, practically everywhere apart from the major export ports, railways encouraged urbanisation around important trade centres associated with the railways and disadvantaged cities that were disconnected from that system. However, in contrast to other locations in India, Uttar Pradesh, with the exception of Kanpur, did not develop significant processing or consumption industries. For multiple reasons, the western UP stagnated. While acknowledging that the long-distance freight rates between maritime ports at Uttar Pradesh may have had some role in its reliance on agricultural and craft production, Derbyshire identifies human factors as more limiting.

In the final section of this work, Derbyshire concludes that railways created conditions in general across India and within Uttar Pradesh specifically for positive social savings. He does so in exquisite detail. However, one might have wanted the text to read less like a dissertation, with the outline form that they often take, and more like a narrative monograph. As a reference work, it excels, although the lack of an index limits its utility in this regard. As suggested at the beginning of this review, the book loses some of its potential excitement by emphasising proof over analysis—analysis has a great deal to say about the creation of modern India if only Derbyshire had emphasised that compelling story rather than the details, which might have been better residing in appendices rather than the text.

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