

Discovery of India

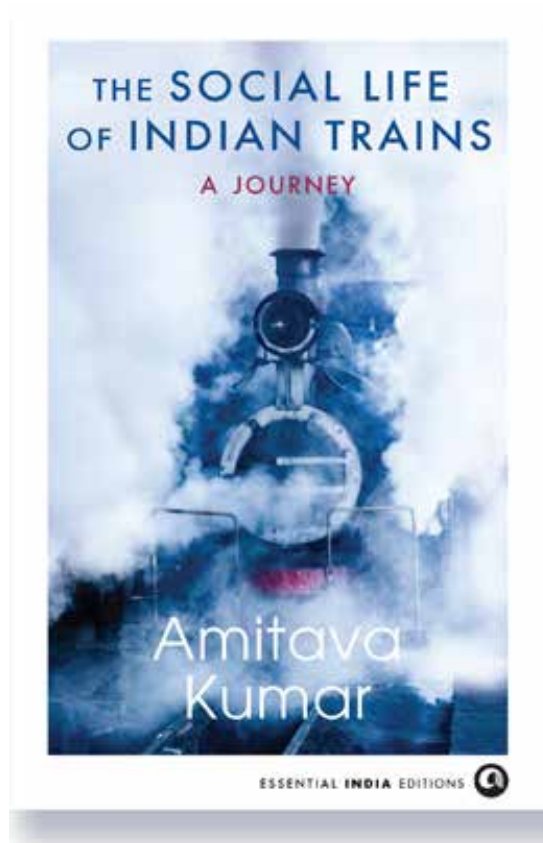
The most enduring image in Amitava Kumar's book on Indian rail journeys is in the Acknowledgements, where he notes that on 19 April 2023, Shiv Dayal Sharma, 82, formerly of the Indian Railways, was peacefully relieving himself by the tracks near Alwar when he was killed by the impact of a cow flung into the air by a passing Vande Bharat Express, the creature of Prime Minister Modi's need for speed and capitalist coolness.

Sharma's contribution to the book is not immediately obvious, but in European psychology, trains symbolise the inevitability of death, which is why book cover art depicts steam trains head-on, with giant headlamps — as on the cover of this slim volume of pop sociology. But South Asia offers a different view: the train is to India what the automobile is to America — it offers liberation from small worlds and the tyranny of fate. The train offers escape from the oppressive lattice of caste, class and community, and is beloved of elopers and fugitives from poverty and the law (in pop culture, *Bunty aur Babli*). It is an instrument of discovery, separation and reunion (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*). The train spirits one away to more spacious worlds, taking ambitious kids to jobs or fame in the big city, and farm hands to seasonal work. In *Pather Panchali*, the train arrives like a beast from another world, to which it will take Apu one day. The train is also the means of homecoming for all sorts of migrants, closing the circle of the hero's journey.

Rail travel used to be the universal specific prescribed for politicians who wanted to know the country they would serve — and to know themselves, too. Mahatma Gandhi rode the rails for years after he returned from South Africa, to experience India directly. Watching the train sequences in Richard Attenborough's biopic, teacher and writer Amitava Kumar agrees: "Yes, this is how you learn about your country. You travel in a train and take notes."

Kumar also recalls *I am 20*, a Films Division documentary by SNS Sastry which went viral in 1967, 30 years before the term 'viral' was coined, and 14 years before *Midnight's Children* put the spotlight on the firstborns of independent India. The black and white film canvassed the opinions of a range of young people, from an air hostess to a child bride, and particularly, a young man who wanted to travel India "with a pen, a notebook, a camera and a tape recorder", to document the country and its hopes and fears. Exactly what Gandhi had done to prepare for the battle to come — and what Kumar would do over a century after the Mahatma.

Trains took Kumar to childhood holidays on his father's leave travel concession (LTC). Later, coming of age in the Eighties, he took a train from his home in Arrah in Bihar, to university in Delhi, the first step to his academic career overseas. The train journey to college was then a rite of passage — upper-middle-class children often made their first real contact with the huddled masses in second-class train compartments. And since they were usually broke, they travelled back home 'unreserved', in the stifling but liberating press of a general compartment. In his memoir *And Then One Day*, the actor Naseeruddin Shah described such a journey from Bombay to Delhi on the



The Social Life of Indian Trains: A Journey

By Amitava Kumar

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eve of the Great Indian Railway Strike of 1974, when 1.7 million rail workers led by the firebrand trade union leader George Fernandes brought the world's biggest rail network to a halt with the world's biggest labour action ever. Shah travelled standing all the way in a crammed train, to beat the moment when the nation's wheels would stop turning.

Bharat darshan two generations after the Mahatma, prefers to walk. The world has changed in mysterious ways.

Kumar's train journeys took him from innocence to experience. Decades after he took a train to Delhi University on a journey that would eventually lead to the US, last year he rode in first class on the Himsagar Express from Kashmir to Kanyakumari — an itinerary which

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A rapidly and callously modernising rail system has now made such tribulations routine for the less advantaged. Fast, air-conditioned, cow-slinging trains like the Vande Bharat are the focus of the railways, and sweaty lower-class compartments are dwindling. AC passengers don't communicate much. They gawp at reels on speakerphone and order lousy food on the internet from within their mobile bubbles. The most fortunate classes fly, insulated from the common herd by 30,000 feet of thin air. Rahul Gandhi, who embarked on his own

recalls an Indira-era slogan. Thankfully, all attempts to flatten India into a uniform culture, from Indira Gandhi's national integration to Narendra Modi's Hindutva majoritarianism, have failed.

At railway stations, Kumar witnesses "a mixture of frailty and strength". Travel spells adversity, and people are more likely to assist each other in transit, where "the state is often missing", he says. Is it? The rail station expresses the presence of the state as palpably as the police station. That is why, Kumar notes elsewhere, people seek refuge in

stations and trains in times of anarchy. The most moving photographs of Partition feature trains. So do its best-known works of fiction: Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*. Besides, stations offer refuge to the disadvantaged, including huge numbers of runaway children and homeless people, because they offer basic amenities like toilets, bathrooms and drinking water. The rail system has a dedicated police force and is safer than the streets, which is why people gather there in times of unrest.

At railway stations, Kumar says that it is possible to see "that impossible creature that we might call the human state". He sees it when a train is pulling out of a station while several women, one with a child, race to get on board and the guard halts the train so that they can board safely. And every day on the platforms of Mumbai, you see overcrowded local trains pulling away with people hanging from the doorways, and yet more people running to board it, and "hands unfurl like flower petals" from the doorways to draw in the stragglers. Rail travellers are welcoming. There's always room for one more.

But Kumar notes that long after Partition, when ghost trains full of corpses crossed the India-Pakistan border in the dead of the night, the railways remain a mobile site of violence. Sikh rail passengers were killed during the pogrom of 1984. Train bombings, especially in Mumbai and on the cross-border Samjhauta Express, heightened tensions for years. In 2002, a fire on the Sabarmati Express at Godhra upended fundamental binaries like right and wrong, good and evil, and the very soul of India changed and turned bitter. In 2023, a railway policeman shot dead his superior officer and three Muslim passengers on a running train, and ordered other passengers to videograph him ranting the praises of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. It would have been unimaginable until Godhra corrupted the Indian imagination.

For about 150 years, the Indian Railways were celebrated as a gift of colonialism, as if the convenience of rail travel compensated for the organised loot of an entire civilisation. In reality, Kumar reminds us, railways were proposed from the 1830s for more efficient extraction and export of India's resources. And after the Uprising of 1857, the Raj keenly appreciated the need to transport troops rapidly across its fast-growing empire. Soon, junctions in the growing rail network made hitherto obscure places like Jamalpur, Kharagpur (now better known for its IIT) and Mokameh Ghat (where Jim Corbett served as a rail manager during World War I) as strategically significant as old towns like Murshidabad, Kanpur and Lucknow. The fast-evolving railways changed the map of India and physically integrated it for the first time ever.

Modern India is a smaller entity than British India, and it is held together by the abstract legal bonds of the Constitution. And anyway, as Amitava Kumar asks, "Does the Constitution come thundering down sturdy rails in the night, sparks flying, the engine hooting?" And can it fling a manslaughtering cow aloft in Alwar, or carry you from Kashmir to Kanyakumari on a life-affirming journey? There's no comparison. ■