



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Steel Tracks, Extracted Wealth: Railways and the Political Economy of Colonialism in Asia and Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of railways in the political economy of colonialism across Asia and Africa, arguing that colonial rail infrastructure was designed primarily as an instrument of resource extraction rather than as a mechanism for integrated regional development. Drawing on economic history scholarship concerned with British India, East Africa, Central Africa, and southern Africa, the article traces four interlocking dimensions of colonial railway systems: their spatial orientation toward coastal ports rather than interior connectivity; the financial arrangements that transferred fiscal risk onto colonised populations while delivering returns to metropolitan investors; the restructuring of agricultural land use toward export monocultures; and the organised movement of coerced and indentured labour along rail corridors. The article further contends that the developmental asymmetries produced by these systems were not incidental byproducts of otherwise neutral infrastructure, but structural outcomes of an imperial economic logic. Evidence drawn from famines in late nineteenth-century India, the labour regimes of southern African mining, and the post-independence persistence of colonial transport geographies in Ghana and elsewhere supports this contention. The article concludes that reading colonial-era railway maps as records of extraction rather than as evidence of modernisation offers a more historically accurate framework for understanding the infrastructural inheritances that continue to shape economic geography across the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Colonial railways • Extraction economy • British India • Infrastructure • Africa • Uneven development



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Introduction

When people picture the railway age, they often imagine steam engines knitting nations together, shrinking distances, and opening up opportunity. That image is not wrong, exactly, but it is incomplete. In the colonial world, from British India to the Congo Free State, railways were built for a very different purpose than those that crisscrossed Europe or the American Midwest. They were constructed to move cotton, coal, rubber, and soldiers rather than to connect communities to each other. Understanding this distinction is essential to grasping why the economic legacies of colonial railways continue to shape Asia and Africa today.

Tracks That Pointed One Way

The first thing to notice about colonial railway maps is their shape. Rather than forming a web linking cities and regions to one another, most colonial lines ran like spokes toward a single hub: a port. In India, lines built by companies such as the East India Railway and the Great Indian Peninsula Railway fanned out from Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras into the interior, but rarely connected interior regions directly to each other without looping back through a coastal terminus. As Hurd (1975, 263) has shown, this radial configuration reflected the administrative and commercial priorities of the colonial state rather than the transport needs of Indian society. The same pattern repeated across Africa. The Uganda Railway, completed in 1901, ran from the port of Mombasa inland to Lake Victoria, built explicitly to move goods and administrative control into the interior and to extract resources outward. The Congo's rail lines existed largely to bypass unnavigable stretches of the river system so that rubber and ivory could reach the Atlantic (Frankema and Woltjer 2021, 4).

This hub-and-spoke design was not an accident of engineering. It reflected the underlying economic logic of colonialism: raw materials out, manufactured goods in, and very little concern for how colonised populations might benefit from lateral movement or regional trade. A farmer in central India might have found it easier to ship grain to London than to a market two hundred miles away in a different direction.

The Finance Behind the Iron

Colonial railways were rarely paid for out of colonial treasuries alone. In India, the British government offered private companies a guaranteed rate of return, typically around five percent, regardless of whether a given line turned a profit. This guarantee system meant that Indian taxpayers effectively underwrote the risk while British shareholders collected steady dividends. Dadabhai Naoroji, one of the earliest Indian nationalist economists, pointed to this arrangement as a clear mechanism of what he called the "drain of wealth," whereby money flowed out of India regardless of local economic conditions (Naoroji 1901, 31-34). Scholars such as Utsa Patnaik have since quantified the broader dimensions of this transfer, arguing that the extraction of surplus through financial instruments including railway guarantees was structurally embedded in the colonial fiscal order (Patnaik 2017, 4-5).

In Africa, financing often came through a combination of metropolitan government funds, forced labour, and taxation designed to compel Africans into the cash economy. Hut taxes and poll taxes, payable only in colonial currency, pushed subsistence farmers into wage labour or cash-crop cultivation simply to meet their tax obligations. Railways then made it feasible to move those crops, whether cocoa in the Gold Coast or groundnuts in Senegal, to the coast for export. As Frankema and van Waijenburg (2012, 899) argue, the tax system and rail infrastructure worked together as a single apparatus of compulsion, reshaping African labour regimes in ways that persisted long after formal colonialism ended.

Cash Crops and the Reordering of Land

Once a railway reached a region, land use in that region often changed within a generation. Areas that had grown diverse subsistence crops shifted toward whatever commodity fetched the best export price: cotton in parts of Egypt and Uganda, jute in Bengal, groundnuts in West Africa, coffee in the highlands of Kenya. This specialisation made colonial economies extraordinarily vulnerable to price fluctuations on markets they had no control over. When cotton prices in Liverpool fell, a farmer in the Nile Delta felt it just as sharply as a trader in London, except without any of the accumulated capital to absorb the shock.

The tragic irony is that this same infrastructure, built in the name of economic development, coexisted with some of the worst famines of the modern era. British India experienced devastating famines in the late nineteenth century even as railways theoretically made it possible to move grain from surplus regions to deficit ones. In practice, grain often moved toward ports for export rather than toward starving districts, because the market logic of the system rewarded whoever could pay, not whoever needed food most. Davis (2001, 26-29) argued that railways became instruments for extracting food out of famine zones just as efficiently as they extracted

export crops in ordinary years. The spatial infrastructure of extraction was, in other words, indifferent to humanitarian need.

Labour, Migration, and Social Disruption

Building thousands of miles of track required enormous labour forces, and colonial administrations rarely relied on voluntary, well-compensated work. Indentured and forced labour built lines across British India, French Indochina, and much of colonial Africa. The construction of the Uganda Railway famously relied on indentured workers brought from British India, many of whom remained afterward, permanently altering the demographic composition of East Africa in ways still visible today in Kenya's South Asian communities (Mangat 1969, 52-53).

Railways also triggered new patterns of internal migration. Once a rail line existed, it became easier for colonial administrations to move labour toward mines, plantations, and construction sites. In southern Africa, rail networks linked directly to the gold and diamond mines of the Witwatersrand, and the movement of migrant labour along these routes reorganised entire societies, pulling men away from agricultural villages and into a wage economy controlled by mining companies. As van Onselen (1976, 128) has documented, family structures, land tenure arrangements, and local political authority all bent under this new gravitational pull, producing social dislocations whose consequences extended well beyond the era of formal colonial rule.

Uneven Development, Then and Now

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of colonial railways is the uneven development pattern they inscribed onto the landscape. Regions that happened to sit along profitable extraction routes received infrastructure investment, however self-interested in its intent, while regions with no exportable commodity were simply bypassed. This is a major reason why, decades after independence, transportation networks across much of Africa and South Asia remain oriented toward old colonial ports rather than toward regional integration. As Jedwab and Moradi (2016, 32) have shown through quantitative analysis of Ghanaian railway data, post-independence economic geography continues to bear the structural imprint of colonial infrastructure decisions made without any regard for long-run indigenous development.

Gauge differences tell a quieter version of the same story. Colonial powers often used incompatible track widths between neighbouring territories, sometimes deliberately, to prevent rival powers from exploiting each other's rail networks for military or commercial advantage (Chaves, Engerman, and Robinson 2014, 195). The result is a patchwork that still complicates cross-border rail transport in parts of Africa and South Asia, a literal engineering constraint inherited from decisions made for reasons that had nothing to do with the needs of the populations who now live along those tracks.

Conclusion

None of this means railways brought no benefit whatsoever. They did enable faster communication, some degree of urbanisation, and eventually became platforms that nationalist movements themselves used to organise and travel. Mahatma Gandhi's well-documented third-class train journeys across India were only possible because of a network built for entirely different purposes (Guha 2006, 131). Infrastructure, once built, can outlive the intentions behind it and be repurposed by those it was never designed to serve.

But it would be a mistake to read colonial railways simply as gifts of modernisation that colonised societies were fortunate to receive. They were tools of extraction first, designed around the needs of imperial economies, financed in ways that transferred risk and reward unevenly, and built by populations who had little say in the matter. The tracks that remain today, some still running the exact routes laid down in the nineteenth century, are a material record of that history. Reading a colonial-era railway map is, in a real sense, reading a map of who that economy was built to serve.

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