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Association of Indian Labour Historians

M.S. Merian — R. Tagore International Centre for Advanced Studies "Metamorphoses of the
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Call for Applications

The Time and Space of Railways: Markets, Work, and Circulation in South Asia

An international workshop in honour of Ian J. Kerr (1941-2020)

Göttingen, 16 – 18 June 2022

This workshop explores new directions of research into the social, economic, temporal, and spatial histories of South Asian railways. Professor Ian J. Kerr, the doyen of this field of research for many years, promoted, particularly through his generous support for younger scholars, an expansive approach to the writing of South Asian railway histories, which had been confined, in the latter decades of the 20th century, mainly to issues of capital investment and market integration. In the last two decades, this vision broadened with younger authors investigating social, cultural, and ecological consequences of railway construction and transport in late 19th- and early 20th-century South Asia as well as the impact of railways on South Asia's circulatory regime at large. Ian Kerr's own work, his research contributions as much as the important volumes that he edited, continued to emphasize the importance of understanding the social, cultural, and economic history of railways in broad and holistic ways.

While pursuing Ian Kerr's core interests in the economic and labour histories of the railways, this workshop also attempts to expand upon further lines of inquiry he formulated for crafting multi-perspectival histories of transport and infrastructure in South Asia. While the railways drove a specific kind of spatial integration of commodity economies and agrarian prices on translocal and imperial scales, they also came to re-mediate the ecological and social rhythms of production processes, travelling experiences, and temporal sensibility. The workshop hopes to open up a conversation about the longer-term dynamics of this process. It aspires to investigate closely the relationship between the railways and the practices and structures of temporalities in diverse setting of commodity production, agrarian market creation, and travel-infrastructure in the subcontinent. Thinking through the time-space of the railways-oriented circulatory regime would also lead us to

ask questions about the relationship of periodic movement and the formation of various social and gendered divisions of labour in both urban and rural contexts. Another aspect of the circulatory regime that we intend to explore is the considerable plurality of modes, techniques and technologies of mobility in South Asia that crossed paths and interacted with the railways. Additionally, we invite queries about the standardization effects, if any, that 'railway time' had on broader socio-spatial practices in different regions of South Asia.

While the plurality of thematic approaches constitutes a major advance in South Asian railway historiography, which needs to be further developed, the present workshop will focus upon certain key issues of the temporal and spatial reorganization in South Asia and pursue related research questions in new directions:

- 1 Markets: The relevance of the railways for processes of marketization in South Asia remains indisputable and Ian Kerr insisted rightly on the need of keeping up communication between, on the hand, "cliometric" approaches concerned with the effect of railways on transportation costs and economic growth and, on the other, qualitative approaches that often emphasize the contradictory and uneven effects of the railways on marketization processes. What are, then, the possibilities for new research into the entangled histories of Indian railways and marketization processes that combine a concern for quantitative proportions with a concern for political, social, and cultural contexts? Can we possibly disaggregate the railway-mediated marketization process as an assemblage of different temporalities of agrarian production against the seemingly linear infrastructural conquest of space by time? How can we re-approach older concerns with the impact of railways on food security and further develop more recent directions of research looking into their relevance, for instance, for ecological transformation? Is it possible to think of the financial and fiscal foundations of railways as a modality of shaping a planned or speculative colonial/postcolonial future? How do we assess the role of technological modernity in the second half of the nineteenth century with its objective to create a different 'present' and a strong discourse of a new Indian future (when caste and religious barriers would fall and punctuality would be the norm)? Can we also, in pursuing this research agenda, move from an exclusive focus on the colonial period to a perspective transcending the temporal threshold of 1947?
- 2 Labour: The railways were by far the largest employer of non-agricultural labour in colonial India and continue to be so in the postcolonial successor states. However, this is not reflected in the subcontinent's historiography of labour even though there have been some advances in the last decade, often facilitated by Ian Kerr himself. His own seminal "Building the Railways of the Raj" (1995) opened this field of research, while giving more attention to actual labour processes than is commonly done in labour history. The recent discovery of the Joseph Stephens Archives (kept at Linnaeus University in Sweden) has demonstrated the potential for further research in this direction. Ian Kerr also alerted younger scholars to the great scope that lay in researching on

“railway workshops” as major industrial sites – a challenge that has been taken up, though still much remains to be studied. The operation of railways, however, has rarely been the focus of historical research to date, even though railway workers’ trade unions in postcolonial India have attracted some attention in recent years. What are, then, the possibilities for new research into the history of Indian railway labour in colonial and postcolonial South Asia—on labour relations, industrial conflict, and work processes? Drawing upon the labour resources of agrarian ‘hinterlands’ as well as wider migratory networks, did railway workshops undergo and engender structural transformations in work relations along the classic theme of ‘time discipline’? Also, both on account of being the site of work as well as by virtue of being a connecting medium between disparate regions and working populations, how did the railways serve to braid together or set apart the various strands of temporal existence across the life-cycles of working subjects in the colony/postcolony?

- 3 Circulation: The older historiography of South Asian railways tended to discuss this mode of transport in isolation, mirroring in a way the self-representation of its colonial designers who imaged themselves to impose a network of iron rails and steel bridges upon the “tabula rasa” of a previously static society. Such perspectives, even if they continue to colour recent publications, are no longer tenable as new research on the history of circulation in modern South Asia has demonstrated—research, once again, enthusiastically encouraged by Ian Kerr. What then are the possible new directions in the history of circulation and transport that might be developed in the future? How can we productively approach the heterogeneity of circulatory regimes in colonial and postcolonial South Asia that comprised different modes of transport and communication, combined diverging temporalities and rhythms of socio-cultural lives while shaping the fractured spatial scales of the nation and region? Beyond the tendency towards uniformity and standardization, to what extent did ‘railway time’ impose a new discipline and generate greater spatial uniformity? To what extent was it subverted by various modalities of mobility and circulation that plugged into its expanding network-like form? Beyond mobility, what were the implications for various spheres of social and cultural life?

The workshop will be held, conditions permitting, in person at the University of Göttingen in Germany. Applications from early career scholars and doctoral students are particularly encouraged. Proposals for papers (including an abstract of maximum 1,000 words) should be emailed to indian.history.archives@cemis.uni-goettingen.de by 15 January 2022. The selection will be concluded by 15 February 2022. The papers are to be submitted electronically by 15 May 2022.

