Opening of the Line to Benares

"it is right, I say, that those who have hitherto wrought bravely and unflinchingly towards the accomplishment of this great object, in spite of difficulties which on the whole are perhaps unequalled in the annals of engineering, should, on the conclusion of their labours, be crowned with their full meed of praise,"

On a crisp winter morning of the 5th of February, 1863, the grand portico of Howrah station shimmered under the soft glint of the rising sun. The East Indian Railway's most ceremonious special train — composed of eight well-appointed carriages — awaited its most distinguished guest. On board were the Viceroy of India, James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, accompanied by Lady Elgin and their retinue. Beside them stood Mr. Palmer, the stately Agent of the East Indian Railway, and the quietly commanding Chief Engineer, George Turnbull, whose dreams of steel had just reached fruition.

The train's destination was the holy city of Benares — a city of gods, ghats, and now, gleaming iron. After years of cautious advance, interrupted works, scouring rivers, and surging monsoons, the East Indian Railway had finally laid claim to a feat unmatched in the annals of British India: an uninterrupted line of 541 miles, stretching from the eastern colonial gateway of Howrah to the banks of the Ganges at Benares.

The journey was not just symbolic; it was part of Lord Elgin's grand northern progress. Having secured the approval of the Home Government for an extended absence of eighteen months from Calcutta, he was charting a path toward Shimla, the new imperial summer capital nestled in the Himalayas. But before the ascent to those cooling heights, a grand display of progress and imperial engineering awaited in Benares.

At Dinapore, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Cecil Beadon, joined the viceregal entourage, lending both political weight and regional blessing to what would unfold as one of the most dazzling public celebrations of railway enterprise since Dalhousie's own pronouncements.

A Grand Banquet in the City of Light

The climax came on the evening of 7th February 1863, as Benares glittered under a thousand gas lamps. A magnificent durbar and dinner was held by the East Indian Railway Company to mark the occasion — a salute to steel, sovereignty, and steam. Lord Elgin himself presided over the moment: the formal inauguration of the direct line from Howrah to Benares, the longest unbroken stretch of railway anywhere in India at the time — a feat that stunned even hardened critics of colonial ambition.

The last segment, from Dinapore to Benares, had been completed only a month earlier on 22 December 1862. It was not without challenges. Engineers had discovered, to their alarm, that the bridge over the torrential Karamnasa River lacked sufficient waterway. A violent deluge from the hills during the monsoon had nearly brought the bridge to ruin — the surging waters having

carved dangerously close to the piers. It was only the tireless efforts of the supervising engineer, acting with desperate speed and skill, which averted disaster.

“The rush of water from the hills, more than usually heavy, could not, on arrival at the bridge, run off with sufficient rapidity. The water scoured nearly under the piers of the bridge, thereby seriously jeopardising the safety of the entire structures.”

Two new arches were hastily added. And thus, just in time for the Viceroy’s journey, the line was made safe, steady, and ceremonially sound.

The Engineers and the Empire

The occasion brought with it a wave of praise for those who had transformed the dream into reality. Among them, George Turnbull, the East Indian Railway’s first and long-serving Chief Engineer, stood tall — though not without signs of wear. After thirteen relentless years, having supervised the construction of over 900 miles of railway, Turnbull was now stepping down, his health giving way to the ceaseless toil.

Bronchitis—his “old enemy”—had returned with a sharpness that confined him to his quarters. Yet even in illness, he was drawn into the machinery of empire. Lord Elgin, the Governor-General of India, had earlier requested him statistical notes and railway data for an impending speech in Benares. Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant-Governor, demanded the same. Turnbull, coughing and fevered, had sat indoors with pen in hand, drafting memoranda for men who would stand at durbars beneath punkahs and chandeliers, while he himself wrestled with breath.

Sir Cecil Beadon, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal rose that evening, his voice strong with admiration, and raised a toast that would echo through engineering halls for decades:

“It is right, I say, that those who have hitherto wrought bravely and unflinchingly towards the accomplishment of this great object… should, on the conclusion of their labours, be crowned with their full meed of praise... They have earned the approbation and gratitude of their fellow countrymen.”

But the praise did not end at dinner speeches.

On 22 December 1862, a letter had been dispatched from the Public Works Department in Fort William to the Governor-General in Council, formally recommending that Turnbull’s "eminent public services" be acknowledged at the highest level. Captain F.S. Taylor, R.E., acting as Officiating Joint Secretary to the Government of Bengal, wrote with clarity and conviction:

“The magnificent series of works forming this important railroad have been planned and carried out by Mr. Turnbull from the very outset... under circumstances of extraordinary difficulty. His Honour considers that Mr. Turnbull fully deserves some marked acknowledgment.”

The Government of India, in turn, affirmed the sentiment in the Official Gazette. Turnbull's contributions, they declared, had not only served the Company but "the public at large." Even the House of Commons, in their Accounts and Papers, Volume 43, acknowledged the achievement:

"Mr. Turnbull, having been the first railway engineer employed in India, has now happily seen the portion of this great work… brought to a close… with the most complete satisfaction to his employers and to the Government, and with the highest credit to himself."

His successor, Mr. Power, noted for his work on the Soane Bridge, would now take the helm.

A Moment in Imperial Time

Lord Elgin's journey to Benares was not merely a political engagement — it was an assertion of imperial confidence, a public endorsement of infrastructure as statecraft. In the past, Lord Dalhousie had opened the line to Raniganj, and Lord Canning had followed by launching the Rajmahal extension. But now it was Lord Elgin's turn, and with it came a line that connected east to north with an unbroken spine of steel.

This was not just a railway; it was a metaphor for the colonial project itself — straight, commanding, and forged through terrain both natural and political.

In a land where ancient footpaths still wound between temples and fields, where pilgrims moved with the rhythm of the river and the cycle of the sun, now thundered the iron horse, a creature of coal and water, carving through the silence of centuries.

And so, as the Viceroy's carriage rolled into Benares and the trumpet of progress was sounded under chandeliers and imperial flags, a chapter closed on the first great phase of Indian rail — and a new one began.

A Toast to the Engineer

On the 29th of April 1863, beneath the gilded chandeliers of the London Tavern, a stately room once accustomed to toasts for naval victories and imperial exploits, the shareholders of the East Indian Railway Company gathered for their half-yearly general meeting. Chairing the assembly was Robert Wigram Crawford, M.P., a man equally at home in Parliament and the boardroom. But this was no routine financial reckoning. That morning, an era had quietly come to a close.

The announcement was made with a sense of solemnity and reverence. George Turnbull, the indefatigable Chief Engineer of the Bengal Division, had tendered his resignation. After thirteen years of service — years marked by floods, famines, monsoons, and miraculous feats of steel — Turnbull's health had given way. The great line from Howrah to Benares stood completed, and the man who built it, step by unrelenting step, now passed the baton.

The room hushed as Crawford read the Board's statement. Their words, though formal, brimmed with sincerity:

“They take this opportunity of echoing the desire of the Government of India that Mr. Turnbull's public services should receive some marked acknowledgment on the part of Her Majesty's Government... They will be prepared to support most cordially any vote of money... with a view to provide a testimonial, which shall adequately mark their respect and esteem.”

It was not mere lip service. Mr. Adams rose to propose a resolution — that a sum of £2,000 be drawn from the interest account and given to Turnbull in a manner agreeable to him. It was a significant gesture, not just in amount but in tone: a tribute from men who understood that empires are not built on policy alone, but on grit, steel, and sweat.

Sir M. Stephenson, the pioneer of EIR and a veteran of many a colonial enterprise, added with emotion that he had witnessed Turnbull’s labours in India firsthand. The success of the railway, he said, had hinged on “putting the right man in the right place.”

It was not only Turnbull’s engineering that drew admiration. His remarkable return journey from India was a feat in itself. Having left Benares on 8 February, he reached Calcutta by the 9th, boarded the ship “Nemesis” the same day, and arrived in London on 15 March. The journey — over land and sea, across continents and oceans — had taken just 36 days, a marvel of Victorian speed and efficiency.

The Road to Jamalpur: A Day in the Life of a Viceroy

Back in India, the Viceregal party continued its ceremonial journey along the newly completed line. Their destination that day was Jamalpur, nestled 297 miles from Calcutta, chosen not for pomp, but for practical inspection. The Governor-General, Lord Elgin, was keen to view the engineering works before daylight faded.

A specially outfitted saloon carriage, resplendent in wood and brass, awaited the Elgins. This was no ordinary journey. The train itself — symbolic of modern imperial power — had been prepared with great care to reflect the significance of the occasion: the formal opening of the line to the sacred city of Benares.

At Burdwan, the train briefly halted. Lord Elgin stepped out to greet the Maharajah of Burdwan, a diplomatic nod to the princely order. The stop, however, caused delays. Railway officials assured the Viceroy that time would be made up before Beddeah or Synthea, but their plans would soon be undone by coal.

In their eagerness to impress, the East Indian Railway had stocked their engines with coal from the famed Giridih colliery — specifically from the Kurhurbaree seam. Though renowned for its calorific value, the coal had unfortunately deteriorated due to prolonged atmospheric exposure. Instead of roaring furnaces and pounding pistons, the engines wheezed and sputtered.

“So it was in vain that the stokers fed the fires to repletion; the more they burned, the less steam they got. Station after station, the time got worse and worse. The travellers, whether Viceregal or of more common clay, the more impatient.”

An Experimental Detour: The Light Railway at Nulhatee

Despite the delays, the Governor-General insisted on stopping at Nulhatee, where an experiment in railway engineering was quietly unfolding — an effort that could, if successful, revolutionise Indian transport.

There, the Viceroy inspected a light railway laid by Mr. Wilson, a former EIR engineer, now working with the Indian Branch Railway Company. The line stretched from Moorshedabad, once the seat of Nawabi power in Bengal, and was laid not on traditional embankments but on ordinary road surfaces, using a four-foot gauge — narrower than the standard broad gauge but vastly cheaper to build.

The project was expected to open in two months. It was not merely a local curiosity. It was part of a larger vision: a network of low-cost feeder lines crisscrossing the subcontinent — from Cawnpore through Lucknow, along the Doab to the Himalayan foothills, and across Rohilkhand to Umballa.

These lines promised a frugal future: built at £3,500 per mile, far below the £12,000 cost of guaranteed lines. The Government of India would offer a £1,000 per mile subvention, provided they conformed to the standard five and a half foot gauge. With iron sleepers to offset the scarcity of timber and lightweight engines of just 14–15 tons, they were designed for speeds no more than 16 miles per hour.

It was, in short, a railway for the Indian interior, not the imperial elite. And at its helm stood Wilson — the same man who had engineered the Burdwan–Rajmahal section, and who had now turned his attention to making railways for the common man.

“A first experiment in a system of railway construction which may yet revolutionize Indian transit,” noted one observer.

Passage through the Rajmahal Hills

After the tiffin halt at Rampore Haut, the Viceregal train wound its way along the base of the Rajmahal Hills. It passed through a landscape that changed with every mile — from the alluvial lushness of Lower Bengal to the stony rise of the hills. The names of stations drifted by like verses in an epic: Teen Pahar, junction to the old town of Rajmahal; Colgong, overlooking the Ganga; Bhagalpur, the ancient city of silk; and Sultanganj, sacred to pilgrims.

The natural grandeur of the region offered a moment of calm — a scenic interlude in an otherwise tightly scheduled journey. The topography altered subtly but surely. Around 250 miles from Calcutta, Lord Elgin himself observed the change — the air became sharper, the soil more arid, the vegetation sparse. The uniform damp of the delta gave way to dry, clear mornings and biting night air, hinting at the climate of the highlands ahead.

The hills soon rose to meet the tracks, and the train approached one of the engineering marvels of the route — the Monghyr Tunnel, cut like a wound through the hillside. Stretching a quarter-

mile, its entrance and exit were arched in brick, but the heart of it remained bare rock, a reminder of the untamed land it pierced. On the far side, the train curved toward Jamalpur, a name that would soon become synonymous with railway enterprise.

Jamalpur: The Industrial Heart of the Railway

Nestled in a natural amphitheatre of low forested hills, Jamalpur was no ordinary station. Here the East Indian Railway had constructed extensive locomotive workshops, red-brick barracks, and arched-roofed officers' quarters for more than 800 workers. The station exuded purpose, planning, and permanence. It was a village of industry tucked within a forested bowl, and the bracing evening air welcomed the Viceregal entourage, which halted for the night.

A visitor arriving by morning light might have found themselves led, as one travel account noted, to a comfortable room with a well-laid breakfast, managed by none other than Mr. Kellner — famed for his hotel at Burdwan. The food was hearty, the charge modest — Rs. 1 and 8 Annas for a full breakfast — and plans were already underway to build a large hotel at Jamalpur, envisioned as a resort for invalids and leisure-seekers.

"The air is pure and fresh; the scenery is pretty, and Monghyr, with its hot springs and park, is close at hand... within twelve hours' ride of Calcutta, we know of no spot so inviting as Jamalpur will prove when every convenience for travellers is complete."

The next morning, the Viceregal train pressed forward. From Jamalpur, the line snaked along the base of the hills for fifteen miles before entering a vast plain. Here, the rich farmland of Bihar unfurled in all directions. Poppies, their scarlet heads swaying in the wind, alternated with fields of linseed, rapeseed, and castor-oil plants. The abundance was startling.

Warehouses — broad and tall — were under construction at every station to accommodate the rising tide of goods traffic. But the railway remained a single line, and even the most careful foresight could not ensure complete safety and efficiency.

"No care or foresight could enable the traffic of both passengers and goods to be carried on to the extent which must arise either satisfactorily or safely," one observer wrote, adding that until a double line and better-trained local staff were in place, the risk of accidents remained uncomfortably high.

Bridges, Viaducts, and Dinapore's Grand Reception

The first grand engineering work after leaving Jamalpur was the Kiul Bridge, a lattice girder structure spanning nearly a third of a mile. From there, a procession of viaducts, stations, and bridges led the train toward Dinapore.

There, the reception was regal. Military and civil officials stood in fine dress. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Cecil Beadon, joined the Viceroy. Kellner's canteen again provided food fit for royalty — a lavish tiffin, followed by an elegantly served dinner, praised for its quality and care.

By early 1862, the line had already reached Monghyr, and the dream of a Calcutta–Benares connection seemed within reach. The bridge over the Soane River, one of the most ambitious undertakings of the line, was projected to be completed by June. Engineers had confidently promised that by October, the entire route from the Presidency to Benares would be complete.

They had, by and large, kept their word.

Tinpahar to Bhagalpur section was opened on *1 November 1861*and Bhagalpur to Jamalpur on *10 February 1862*.

Jamalpur to Danapur: section was commissioned on *17 November 1862* and Danapur to Mughal Sarai on *22 December 1862*. The last section, Kurrumnassa to Benares (66½ miles) was also made ready on *22 December 1862*

Thus, a continuous 639-mile line from Calcutta to Benares now lay open to the world.

"Whether looking to the political and other difficulties encountered and overcome, or to the stupendous nature of many of the works," wrote one account, "the completion of the Bengal Division must be a source of the highest gratification to all parties involved."

The End of the Bullock-Train: Soldiers in Motion

The railway did more than move goods and civilians. It transformed the logistics of empire.

Before this iron road stretched across the Gangetic plain, British troops on their way to regimental stations in the north had to rely on the slow and dusty bullock-train, trudging along the Grand Trunk Road at 20 miles a day. The new railway cut that to 100 miles a day.

The Commander-in-Chief approved a formal routing plan, covering the entire movement of troops from Howrah to Benares in four days: The first day they would travel up to Saintia, second day to Bhagalpur, third day they would reach to Dinapore and finally on fourth day troops will reach Benares.

Rest stations along the way were equipped with medical officers, hospitals, and facilities for the sick in detachments not accompanied by a surgeon. Before this, regiments would disembark at Bhagalpur and take river steamers to Benares — a journey dependent on the whims of monsoon-fed rivers.

"Twenty days' journey are reduced to four," noted one report, "and will eventually be further abbreviated."

A Line Etched Across the Heart of India

By the end of 1862, barring the Barrakur Extension and some minor station work, the entire Bengal Division was considered practically complete. The East Indian Railway Company, born

in the boardrooms of London and forged in the heat of India's plains, had delivered a railway that ran from the Presidency to the ancient holy city of Benares.

The cost of the dream was considerable. According to Allen's Mail, the capital required to complete the line to Delhi, with a single rail, was estimated at £19.7 million. Of this, by the end of 1862, £17.15 million had already been expended, raised through shares and debentures. The remaining £1.76 million stood ready, waiting for the last rails to be laid.

The rails had cut through forests, skirted rivers, burrowed through hills, and stitched together provinces that had once seemed an eternity apart. The trains now carried troops, poppies, engineers, Viceroys, and pilgrims — all bound by iron and ambition

The Sleepers: The Dilemma beneath the Rails

Even as the rails were laid across vast stretches of the Gangetic plains, a more elemental struggle played out beneath them. Not one of stone or steel — but of timber. The mighty locomotives of the East Indian Railway glided over iron rails, but these rails depended entirely on the humble sleeper — the horizontal blocks of wood that bore the load, bound the tracks, and cushioned the rhythm of empire.

It was not the iron that failed them. It was the trees.

Three years earlier, Allen's Mail had reported that the primary cause of delay in the East Indian Railway's progress was the non-arrival of essential materials from England — rails, fishplates, spikes — and when they did arrive, they languished at Calcutta docks, stuck in the slow churn of port and bullock-cart.

By 1862, iron was no longer the issue. "All the necessary permanent way was on the spot," the paper noted, "but wood had failed the engineers." Despite chemical treatment, even the best timber disintegrated with the tropical rapidity that defied northern logic. Rot, termite, and moisture waged a silent war against the railway, and the demand for fresh sleepers to replace the old — every six years on average — became a recurring nightmare.

The two best forested tracts of India, in Oudh and Kasheepore, could have met the demand. But those lands, seized from Nepal in the last war, had been handed as rewards — to Jung Bahadur, the powerful minister of Nepal, and to the Nawab of Rampur, whose loyalty had been well bought. The East Indian Railway, by contrast, was left scrambling for access to viable timber.

By May 1862, the situation had reached a crisis. The lack of wooden sleepers threatened to halt the expansion entirely. Allen's Mail sounded the alarm: unless a fresh supply was secured, the grand line stretching from Patna to Benares, Mirzapore, and Allahabad, and even the Agra–Delhi stretch, would become non-functional within the year.

The goal had been ambitious: to lay twelve miles of track each month, subject to availability of materials. That progress now stalled under the weight of its own wooden foundation.

In response, the East Indian Railway turned to science. The government dispatched Dr. Hugh Cleghorn, a trained botanist and early forest conservator, to scour the Himalayan forests and propose a long-term plan for conservation. But his ideas — visionary as they were — would take a generation to bear fruit.

Meanwhile, alternatives were tried. Iron sleepers, shaped like inverted saucers, were tested beneath the rails. They promised durability, but they delivered instability, loud noise, and passenger discomfort. The familiar, earthy stillness of wood was absent. Worse, the cost of maintaining wooden sleepers — despite their flaws — was staggering: ₹12.5 lakhs annually on the East Indian line alone, according to Chief Engineer Turnbull. With each sleeper priced at ₹3–₹4, the sheer scale of the operation was staggering.

The East Indian Railway was learning that the march of progress often turned on the simplest of things: not just steel and steam, but trees and termites.

Spanning the Soane: The Iron Triumph

If wood betrayed the railway beneath its feet, iron would reclaim glory across its rivers. Nowhere was this clearer than at the Soane Bridge — the most ambitious engineering feat on the line, and a monument to British resolve.

The train left Arrah, its wheels clattering into the distance, and every passenger leaned out for a glimpse. Before them rose a sight unseen in India: twenty-nine towering iron arches, stretching across a vast bed of sand and water — the Soane River, long unbridged and unconquered.

Here, for the first time, the mighty Soane — a river of deceptive calm in dry months and ferocious torrents during monsoon — was drawn into the fold of civilization. As the train crossed, it paused mid-span, and the Viceroy's entourage descended in wonder.

"A magnificent assertion of British energy and power," one journalist wrote. "A universal stretch of science."

The bridge spanned 1,450 yards, composed of 29 arches, each 150 feet wide, standing upon piers 12 feet thick, sunk into 32 feet of yellow clay using a cluster of brick wells. The structure's height was not ornamental. It was essential — to stand above the Soane's infamous floodwaters.

The river, during most of the year, was little more than a giant sandbed, dotted with thin meandering streams. But when the monsoon arrived, it transformed into a raging inland sea, its waters rushing over a channel three miles wide.

"For the greater part of 100 miles," engineers observed, "its breadth exceeded two miles, even reaching three. Yet during floods, its depth averaged only twenty feet, seldom more than thirty."

The engineers chose their spot wisely — a narrow neck of the river, just 4,000 feet across, with high clay banks and a bed of stiff clay beneath the sand, discovered through painstaking borings.

Initially, the plan had been to build brick arches. But wisdom prevailed: the design evolved into a hybrid structure — brick piers with a wrought-iron girder superstructure, supporting a railway track above and a cart-and-foot roadway below. A structure worthy of Newcastle, made for the plains of Bihar.

Construction began in 1856, but within a year, history intervened.

Interrupted by War of Independence: 1857

The First War of Independence raged through North India like wildfire. The East Indian Railway was not spared. At the Soane Bridge site, twice over, the works were destroyed, tools and timber burnt, progress halted. The damage — over £42,000 at Soane alone — was only a fraction of the total £3 million in losses suffered by the company.

When engineers returned in November 1858, it was as if the site had to be rebuilt from scratch. The design was revised: instead of twelve 10-foot wells per pier, they would now sink three massive 18-foot brick wells per pier, each reinforced with wrought-iron curbs, vertical rods, and horizontal iron rings. These foundation wells plunged 32 feet below low water, anchoring the bridge in the deepest layers of the riverbed.

By 1860, the piers were rising. Soon after, the iron girders, fabricated in Elswick, Newcastle, were reassembled at the site using towering timber stagings. The bridge was virtually complete by 1861, though delays in the arrival of a few final parts pushed its opening to the end of 1862.

News of the bridge's construction had made headlines in England. In 1856, the *Manchester Guardian* reported:

"A bridge of novel construction is now being made in this country for the East Indian Railway… nearly a mile in length… twenty-nine piers, each spanning 150 feet. Like the High Level Bridge at Newcastle, it will consist of two roadways — upper for rail, lower for foot and palanquin bearers."

Each span was a lattice of wrought iron, both light and strong. In trials, one arch — weighing 120 tons — withstood 362 tons of pressure, with just two inches of downward bend. The girders sat on iron rollers to allow for expansion during India's searing summers and cold winters.

The design — by Mr. George Rendel of London — became a showpiece of Victorian engineering, shipped in parts and reassembled like clockwork on the Indian plains.

"No one who has seen it can forget the impression created by this wonderful combination of strength with lightness," wrote a traveller. "The train glides over its fairy-like lattice structure with an effect indescribable."

Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, was so taken with the structure that he joined the train under the bridge, eager "to know more," and later conversed at length with Mr. Turnbull, the Chief Engineer, alongside the Viceroy.

A Bridge over India's Future

The real triumph of the Soane Bridge lay not just in its structure, but in what it represented. It became, as one commentator put it:

"An enduring monument of the benefits conferred on India during the present reign. Nothing has affected the native mind so powerfully or favourably as these railway undertakings."

While carts and pedestrians used the lower tunnel, the iron rails above carried the trains of empire — puffing, screeching, triumphant.

On the return journey from Benares, the full sweep of the bridge revealed itself. As the train curved for nearly two miles, passengers could see the entire structure — a ribbon of iron stretched across the golden riverbed. Occasionally, a steamer would paddle past, reminding all of a time when rivers dictated the pace of travel.

No longer. The iron road had triumphed.

And so, between the decay of timber sleepers and the strength of iron bridges, the East Indian Railway advanced — each sleeper laid and each span bridged in defiance of India's terrain, climate, and history.

A Royal Arrival and the Iron Triumph at Benares

It was 5 P.M.in the evening on the 6th of February, 1863, when the special train pulled into the Benares station—half an hour ahead of its scheduled time. For a train to outpace the clock was a feat rare enough in those days, yet here it was: a steel serpent having raced across 540 miles of newly forged iron arteries, beating time itself, and catching the great city utterly unprepared.

The Viceroy, Lord Elgin, emerged from his compartment to find the platform in mild disarray. The police scrambled to form a makeshift guard, and the soldiers of Her Majesty's 20th, along with the Queen's Bays, galloped in just in time—to be too late. The grand ceremonial procession planned by the Rajah of Benares, complete with bejeweled elephants, moustached sowars, and camel-drawn palanquins, had to be halted on the far side of the river. The East Indian Railway Company, having delivered the Viceroy safely and comfortably across a terrain once thought impassable, now sought to impress him further—not with punctuality, but with pomp.

By dawn the next morning on Saturday, Benares was transformed into a carnival of colonial and native pageantry. The streets throbbed with colour and motion—elephants festooned with embroidered caparisons lumbered through the crowds, while camels bobbed their heads above a sea of turbans. Spearmen jostled for space with sowars, their uniforms stitched more with dust than with discipline. Every corner of the city seemed to hum with anticipation, as if Benares itself had dressed up to receive a new destiny.

The Viceroy's first public engagement was brief but symbolic. At eleven o'clock, in the Commissioner's house, he received the station's officers and dignitaries in a levee that was all

courtly handshakes and gentle bows. But it was the durbar that followed which revealed the imperial theatre in full flourish.

Inside a vast tent stitched together for the occasion, Lord Elgin took his seat on a high-backed chair of state. On his left sat the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, and on his right, Colonel Durand, the Foreign Secretary. The Governor of the North-Western Provinces was notably absent, but no matter—his place was filled by spectacle. In a great semi-circle before the Viceroy sat native nobility: the Rajah of Benares shimmering in gold brocade, the Maharajah of Vizianagram on pilgrimage, flanked by nobles from Bettiah, Doomraon, and even Gorakhpur and Patna. It was a durbar not just of hierarchy, but of history.

Lord Elgin, his Scottish solemnity wrapped in the garb of imperial grace, rose to address the gathering. He welcomed the rajahs by name, praising their loyalty during the rebellion of 1857. But the tone quickly shifted from courtesy to statesmanship.

"This great railway," he said, gesturing to the iron road now tethering Calcutta to the heart of Hindustan, "will raise the value of your estates, bring prosperity to your people, and bind us together not only in commerce, but in understanding." It was a speech both tactical and tender, a carefully measured reassurance that British power came not merely with muskets but with material progress. And yet, beneath the surface, the message was unmistakable: you owe this to British capital and engineering. Let the iron road be a symbol of partnership—albeit on imperial terms.

As the midday sun dipped and shadows lengthened, the British and Indian dignitaries reassembled, not for politics but for pleasure. The Assembly Rooms of Benares, swept and candlelit, played host to the grand dinner of the evening. The caterer, Mr. Kellner, had only five days' notice, yet managed to conjure a feast fit for royalty—complete with punch cooled by great lumps of Wenham Lake ice, hauled all the way from Calcutta.

Seated at the long table with Lord Elgin were Mr. Turnbull, the formidable Chief Engineer of the East Indian Railway, and Mr. Edward Palmer, the Company's Agent. The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Campbell, the Rajah of Benares, and various engineers and administrators filled the remaining seats, a mingling of crown, capital, and caste.

It was Palmer who rose first for the toast, lifting his glass to salute the Viceroy, and then to the railway itself. "The presence of His Excellency," he declared, "is proof that our work is not in vain, that our labours have won the approval of the highest office in the land."

Lord Elgin stood to reply, his voice tempered with humility but fortified with purpose. He invoked the memory of his predecessors—Lord Dalhousie, who had overseen the departure of the first train from Howrah to Burdwan, and Lord Canning, who had joined the celebration at Rajmahal in 1860. Now, standing before these men of iron and finance, he pledged his continued support. But his speech was more than ceremonial. It was visionary.

India, he said, now had 2,400 miles of operational railway—900 of which belonged to the East Indian Railway alone. Another 2,000 miles were under construction. But the model of

government-guaranteed capital, he warned, was unsustainable. “We must learn from America,” he mused, recalling the rickety yet effective cutcha railways of his travels from New York to Washington. If India could not yet afford the £15,000-a-mile pukka lines of England, then let it embrace the practical cutcha ones instead.

And then he turned his gaze to the iron colossus itself: the Soane Bridge.

“I believe,” he said, “that it is longer than any bridge in the world, save for the Victoria Bridge at Montreal, where I laid the foundation-stone myself.” But the Soane was no easy rival. The British may have mastered the ice of the St. Lawrence, but here, they battled monsoon torrents, treacherous sands, and the ghosts of the 1857 uprising, which had twice destroyed the foundations.

It was, as he rightly observed, a monument not just to engineering, but to resilience. Constructed with wells sunken into stiff clay, borne upon wrought-iron girders riveted in England and reassembled on the Ganges, the Soane Bridge stretched nearly a mile—its 29 arches spanning 150 feet each. It was both a fairy lattice and a brute of iron, a paradox of elegance and endurance, and a metaphor for the Empire itself.

As the guests raised their glasses for the final toast—“Success and Prosperity to the East Indian Railway”—the strains of Her Majesty’s 20th band filled the air, the punch bowls clinked, and somewhere in the distance, perhaps, the rails gleamed faintly in the moonlight.

What the Viceroy and his entourage had inaugurated that week was more than a railway line. It was a new phase in the imperial experiment—one that would draw the princes and peasants of India ever closer to the rhythms of industrial time and imperial ambition. The journey from Calcutta to Benares, once arduous and uncertain, had become a symbol of certainty, speed, and spectacle. The train had not only arrived; it had arrived ahead of time. And history, as ever, was running to catch up.

The Toasts and Tributes: A Celebration of Iron, Sweat, and Steam

As the clinking of wine glasses faded beneath the chandeliered halls of Benares’ Assembly Rooms, a quiet anticipation fell over the crowd. Rising from his seat, Mr. Edward Palmer, the seasoned Agent of the East Indian Railway, cleared his throat. He was a man more comfortable among ledgers and track plans than after-dinner speeches, and it showed.

“My Lord and Gentlemen,” he began with modest humility, “I wish this task had fallen to someone with a more eloquent tongue — someone more suited to extol the greatness of what we have accomplished.”

But if Palmer’s tongue was hesitant, the facts he laid out needed no embellishment. The East Indian Railway, he reminded them, had not sprung up overnight. Its conquest was measured not just in miles of track — 240 more that day, and over a thousand in total — but in years of patient toil and repeated vindication.

Eight years had passed since the first modest section opened in Bengal. Since then, each new extension had not only delivered more passengers and goods but had defied skeptics who once believed this dream a folly. Once dismissed as a local experiment, the railway now stood as a spine of steel running across northern India.

Then rose Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, raising his glass to the engineers and their staff. His words were firm but generous, brimming with quiet admiration.

“In an age when engineering marvels seem to rise each year,” he said, “we risk becoming numb to the genius that makes them possible. We forget that great works like this railway require not just funding and design, but indomitable will — the kind that stares down floods, fever, and failure.”

He paused, allowing the weight of history to settle upon the room.

“This is not merely a railway,” Beadon continued, “but the great artery of India — the first main link in a network that will one day span the continent. Its steel veins will carry commerce, unite provinces, and bind the fates of millions. It is unmatched — in structural mastery, in political importance, in the social transformation it heralds.”

His praise was not just for the present moment, but for a journey that had begun nearly two decades earlier. A young visionary, Sir Macdonald Stephenson, had first dared to dream of railways in India — only to be met with derision. Detractors had warned of white ants devouring wooden sleepers, monsoon rains dissolving embankments, rust creeping across rails like plague.

Yet here they were.

Palmer and Beadon both pointed to the sheer audacity of what had been built. The Adjai Bridge — nearly twice the length of London Bridge. The tunnel bored through the quartz at Monghyr. The colossal Soane Bridge — one mile long, second only to the famed Victoria Bridge in Montreal.

Every stone, every girder, every arch had a tale of sacrifice. Of engineers like Mr. Turnbull, who had shepherded this vision from the outset. Of Mr. Sibley, whose elegant bridges tamed the Kuol and Hullohur rivers. Of Mr. Power, who raised the Soane Bridge almost by brute will. And of Mr. Schmidt, the foreign-born engineer who, even while wracked with illness, refused to abandon his post until the final bolt was set.

Their feats had not come easy. Labour shortages, deadly fevers, the upheaval of the Santhal rebellion, and the destructive fury of the 1857 Mutiny had each threatened to derail progress. Twice, rebel forces had destroyed their scaffolding on the Soane.

Still, the engineers endured. And now, they were being honoured not only with toasts but with posterity.

As Sir Cecil concluded, there was a hush before the audience rose, their glasses lifted high.

“To the engineers of the East Indian Railway,” he declared, “and the road they have laid through history.

Mr. Sibley, the Chief Engineer of the North-West Provinces Division of the EIR, rose to speak—not merely to offer gratitude, but to give voice to a decade of sweat, ingenuity, and resolve. He spoke humbly of his division’s “tithe” of contribution to the railway section celebrated that day, but was quick to remind the assembly that the stretch from Allahabad to Agra had already been tamed by iron, and would soon extend to Aligarh and beyond.

Sibley’s candour was refreshing. “The public has at times exhibited an impatience,” he admitted, “which I may term, I hope without offence, an ‘uninformed’ impatience.” He explained the underestimated challenges—delays in the supply of sleepers, the difficult terrain, the misperception of India as a forest-laden timber paradise—and yet, how amidst all this, they had persevered. What they had wrought was no less than a miracle of modern engineering.

Behind this modest address lay a much grander tale of what the railway symbolised. “Easy means of communication,” Sibley declared, quoting an old maxim, “form one of the three chief requisites to make a nation great and happy.” In those words resided the Empire’s own justification for the iron conquest of the land—a belief that progress, even imperial progress, was a gift of civilization.

The evening sparkled with toasts, speeches, and self-congratulation. The East Indian Railway had not merely built a line of iron—it had built a stage for the performance of power, spectacle, and loyalty, with Benares as its theatre.

March to Allahabad and Gazette Notification

The very next day, Lord Elgin continued his inspection tour toward Allahabad. As the railhead ended at Benares, the Viceroy and his entourage travelled onward by dak carriages—each individual occupying a separate cart, each pulled at a hand gallop by ponies relayed every four to five miles. It was a quaint, if not uncomfortable, farewell to an era of travel now rapidly fading into obsolescence. The Viceroy, no stranger to the saddle or the steamer, remarked not on the novelty of the carriages but on the fate of the ponies: “a diminution in the sufferings of the brute creation will be one of the blessings attending the introduction of a railway system.”

The official Gazette of February 7th, 1863, issued from Benares, struck a proud and forward-looking tone. “In ten years,” it recorded, “a continuous length of 601 miles had been opened, from Calcutta to Benares,” not counting the operational lines between Allahabad and Agra. With the upcoming opening to Aligarh, nearly 90 miles a year had been conquered—a speed that, though falling short of initial expectations, stood commendable under the circumstances.

The Viceroy was particularly struck by the engineering marvels of the line. The Soane Bridge, second only in magnitude to one other structure in the world, was hailed as a feat of daring and precision. The Monghyr Tunnel, the girder bridges at Keeul and Hollohur, the flood arches near the rivers—these were not just pieces of civil infrastructure; they were imperial statements in iron and stone.

But no figure loomed larger in the Viceroy's praise than George Turnbull, the retiring Chief Engineer of the Bengal Division. Though not a government servant, Turnbull had served the public cause with uncommon grace, patience, and mastery. His rapport with government officials, his conciliatory spirit, and his technical brilliance had made him a rare gem in a field fraught with egos and turf wars. "In the opinion of H.E.," the Gazette noted, "he well earned the expression of the thanks of the Governor-General."

Meanwhile, at Cawnpore, another marvel awaited Elgin's eyes: a curious steam-powered traction engine, intended to replace the age-old bullock cart service between Cawnpore and Lucknow. Its creator was Mr. Gower, assistant locomotive superintendent at Allahabad—a "hard-headed, practical, and self-made man," as described by *Allen's Mail*. The machine, with its twin vertical boilers and eighteen-horse power output, whisked dignitaries around tight corners and narrow gates at nine miles an hour. Elgin rode it himself, and one journalist—hair windswept and heart pounding—declined further tests, having come dangerously close to demolishing a gate.

Beyond the whimsy of Gower's machine, larger challenges still loomed. The bridge over the Jumna at Delhi, designed by A.M. Rendel and fabricated in Manchester, was still under construction. Twelve iron spans of 216 feet each, perched upon piers across a half-mile stretch, were being assembled with a finesse previously unknown in the East—rivets drilled, not punched; latticework designed to evoke lightness rather than bulk.

Yet accidents were not absent. Arches of the Hindun River bridge collapsed in March 1863 during premature testing. Other piers of the Jumna bridge had to be rebuilt after rains skewed their alignment. Still, with each delay came innovation, and with each misstep, a new lesson in adaptation to India's rhythms.

In a land crisscrossed for centuries by rivers and trade routes, the arrival of the iron rail was a turning point not just in transportation, but in imagination. From Turnbull to Gower, from Elgin to Sibley, these men, knowingly or not, had lit the slow-burning fuse of a revolution—one not of gunpowder, but of steam, steel, and the sudden collapse of distance.

The Empire's engine was now well and truly on the move.

The Offer of Knighthood

In April, back in London, Turnbull received an unexpected letter from Sir William Baker at the India Office. Her Majesty's Government, Baker wrote, had taken note of his "excellent services" and was inclined to reward him with a knighthood. Would he accept? Baker, though writing unofficially, promised to exert his influence should Turnbull desire the honour.

Turnbull paused. He consulted his wife. Then, with characteristic candour, he declined. His reasons were prosaic yet profound: he could not afford the expense of sustaining the dignity of knighthood. He had not grown rich in India; his salary had been consumed in service. "I am not rich enough to sustain the title," he admitted, "and I am not even sure that I would be ambitious of it." More than baubles, he longed for meaningful work, perhaps as a consulting engineer to the Government, where his experience could serve both his country and his family.

Sir William Baker, sympathetic, acknowledged Turnbull's modesty and promised to advocate for some other recognition. In May, a formal letter arrived from the Secretary of State for India, Sir Charles Wood, commending his "great professional ability and steady devotion to duty." It was the Government's final word—a parchment of praise, but nothing more tangible.

Turnbull would later confess that he might have erred in not pressing his claims. After years in India, his health and his professional networks in Britain were frayed. Opportunities slipped away. "I was lazy and diffident," he admitted in 1883, "when I ought to have pushed myself forward, if not for my own sake, then for my family's." The chance was gone.

Thus ended his association with the East Indian Railway—a life's work that transformed Bengal's landscape, yet left its architect with little more than memories, modest means, and a few courteous letters from Leadenhall Street. The iron rails endured; the honours did not.

The Forgotten Engineer

George Turnbull's story closes not with fanfare, but with silence. The man who had coaxed steel and stone into a line across Bengal, who had endured fever, politics, and loneliness to lay down the first rails of empire, returned home without wealth, without honors, and without further employment. The Government's praise arrived on crested paper, but the ink carried no coin, no title, no future.

He had declined a knighthood—an honour dangled before him but incompatible with his modest savings and the frugal life he was condemned to live. In refusing, he revealed both his integrity and his vulnerability. He did not want to parade a title he could not afford to sustain; he wanted only work, and found none.

Turnbull was not unique. The empire's infrastructure—its railways, canals, bridges—was built on the backs of men whose names slipped from public memory even as their works transformed the land. The Governor-Generals dined in durbars; the directors of Leadenhall Street drew dividends; but the engineers, the surveyors, the draughtsmen—those who sweated through Bengal's dust and monsoon—faded into obscurity.

The railway endured. It shrieked across Bengal's plains, brought pilgrims to Benares, coal to Calcutta, and soldiers to the frontier. But its architect died in quiet anonymity, left with nothing more than a handful of official letters and the knowledge that he had helped bind together a subcontinent.

History remembers the visionaries of policy and power; it rarely remembers the men who translated vision into steel. Turnbull was one of those forgotten pioneers—a man whose rails altered the destiny of India, even as his own life was left stranded, like a train upon a siding, unused and unremarked.

The Shifting Lines of Empire

The history of a railway is rarely written in straight lines.

In 1855, the blueprint of imperial ambition in northern India was set. Agra, then the seat of the Government of the North Western Provinces, was to be the anchor. The East Indian Railway, an artery of the colonial state's mechanical heartbeat, would cross the Jumna at Agra, skirt the right bank through Muttra, and run a near-direct line through Ferozepore to Lahore. A logical engineering plan—devised in the language of maps and dominion, where distances collapsed beneath the certainties of imperial cartography.

But history, as it often does, refused to stay straight. The upheavals of 1857—the Great Rebellion—reshuffled more than politics. It shook assumptions, moved capitals, and realigned the logic of logistics. Agra no longer held the same strategic weight. What mattered now was not symbolism, but traffic. Goods, passengers, commerce—revenue. And so, the great rail map was redrawn. The new logic pushed the line up the spine of the Doab, the rich tract of land between the Ganges and the Jumna. This detour was not just a shift in geography; it was a shift in thinking. Commercial viability had at last taken precedence over colonial prestige.

When the Lahore line reached Umritsur, the Government of India again found itself at a crossroads—literal and political. Should the iron trail from Umritsur move westward through Ferozepore, as originally intended, or arc southeast toward Umballa via Jullundur and Loodiana? The latter, though less direct, promised greater returns—economic, military, and political. The soil of the chosen route was richer, the population denser, the risks lower. In the balance of rupees and rifles, the curve of the track found its justification.

Then came the final knot: how to stitch together the grand lines between Delhi and Umballa. Two possibilities emerged. One was a straight thrust north, hugging the right bank of the Jumna through Kurnaul. The other, winding and more expensive, veered eastward through Meerut and Saharanpur. It was thirty miles longer, yes, and dearer to build—but what it offered was far greater: access to the wealthy Upper Doab, military presence in Meerut, and spiritual, commercial, and cultural connections to Mussoorie**,** Dehra Dun**,** Roorkee**,** and Haridwar.

"Even if the direct route along the Jumna were laid," argued the strategists, "the value of the towns along the Doab—Meerut especially—would necessitate a second line eventually." Better to lay one strong trunk through prosperity than two fragile limbs into obscurity. The more expensive line, they concluded, would ironically be the more economical one—by avoiding future redundancy, by serving present wealth, and by shaping the destiny of northern India.

Yet, even as track-laying progressed in 1863, a bureaucratic impasse loomed on the banks of the Jumna in Delhi. The East Indian Railway had arrived at the river, but construction halted. The bridge—a massive undertaking of twelve iron spans—stood half-done. The dilemma? Should the line terminate shy of Delhi, leaving the ancient capital perched like a colonial cul-de-sac, or should the iron road stretch across the river, piercing the heart of the Mughal past?

Complicating matters further, the Punjab Railway—the new rival—was pushing its own vision. The Government had promised it a line from Lahore to Delhi, and now proposed that the two companies meet at Ghazeeabad, making the final stretch into Delhi a joint venture.

The East Indian Railway Company bristled. This branch into Delhi, they argued, was theirs by right and by engineering logic. To share it—let alone surrender control—was a bitter pill. The matter climbed the colonial bureaucracy all the way to the Secretary of State in London.

In the end, a compromise was forged. The EIR would extend across the Jumna and maintain ownership of the Ghazeeabad–Delhi line. The Punjab Railway would access Delhi by running over that twelve-mile stretch, paying for the privilege—an arrangement crafted less from goodwill than from bureaucratic exhaustion.

Still, delays had cost dearly. The uncertainty over the Delhi route had interrupted progress on the third great bridge of the East Indian Railway, after the monumental spans at Soane and Allahabad. Labour contracts stalled, iron girders sat idle, and expenses mounted—silent testimony to the price of political indecision.

When the dust of delay finally settled, the line was opened to the riverbank at Delhi on 1st August 1864. Still, the connection over the Jumna remained the missing tooth in the steel smile of progress. And at Allahabad, the bridge works faced their own delays, floods, and engineering nightmares.

But pride remained undimmed. In April 1864, Mr. Crawford, Chairman of the East Indian Railway Board, addressed shareholders with something bordering on triumph. The line from Calcutta to Delhi, he announced, was open for traffic—1,020 miles of steel and certainty, a journey that once took weeks now compressed into days.

He compared it boldly—not to British lines, nor even European ventures—but to the Grand Trunk line of Canada**,** and found it wanting in the shadow of India's greater marvel. "There is not a line on any part of the continent to compare with it," he declared. "Neither in magnitude, nor in continuity, nor in the complexity of works."

He was right. The East Indian Railway was no longer merely a company's project—it was the spinal cord of a subcontinent, bending to new routes, absorbing new conflicts, and learning, inch by inch, what it meant to tame a country not just with guns or governors, but with bridges, timetables, and locomotives.

By the end of 1864, the East Indian Railway stretched over 1,000 miles, linking Calcutta to Delhi. Temporary stations on high embankments at Allahabad and Delhi, ferries and bridges of boats in place of yet-unfinished spans, all symbolised a railway system in flux, but advancing inexorably.

In the end, what was supposed to be a straight road to Lahore had become something richer: a network of pivots, compromises, delays, and discoveries—a mirror of the empire itself

Engines, Empire, and Exhaustion: The East Indian Railway and the Freight of Progress (1863–64)

By the final months of 1863, the heart of the Gangetic plains rumbled with a new rhythm—the deep, steely beat of rail wagons loaded not with coal, but with cotton. From Agra to Cawnpore, bales upon bales were stacked, not in merchants' godowns but languishing beside iron tracks. The opening of the line to Mirzapore had unlocked a corridor to Calcutta's port, and suddenly, the East Indian Railway found itself straining under the weight of its own success.

The cotton boom, partly born of the American Civil War's blockade, had surged like a monsoon flood. But the native merchants were still wrapping their produce in soft, unpressed sacks, consuming three times the space they needed in precious wagons. Railway trucks designed to carry 160 maunds now staggered along with barely 45. Exasperated officials, led by the energetic Mr. Palmer at Cawnpore, began persuading traders to try mechanical screw presses. When the compressed bales arrived—denser, easier to transport, and without damage—the tide turned. "The native merchants," as one correspondent put it with quiet satisfaction, "were clamorous for getting all their cotton pressed after the manner of the metamorphosed bags."

And yet, the marvel was not just in cotton. In August of 1863, the Bengal Government's Railway Branch sent an emphatic note to Calcutta, marveling at the early success. In just six months since the Benares section had opened, the line had attracted more passengers and cargo than even optimists predicted. Despite a scarcity of rolling stock, unfinished stations, and inexperienced staff, Mr. Batchelor and the Traffic Department were lauded. "It holds out an almost certain promise," the note declared, "that the Railway will soon become independent of the guarantee, and yield more than 5 per cent to shareholders... while enriching the country and strengthening the state."

By June 1864, a unified goods tariff was introduced from Howrah to Allahabad. But the railway's growing fame was becoming its greatest curse. The sheer volume of trade overwhelmed the system. There simply weren't enough wagons or engines. Iron had been shipped from England. Workshops ran day and night. Still, it wasn't enough.

More than 4 million passengers travelled that year—up from 3.27 million the year before. Yet the real story lay in the social divisions that unfolded on the rail lines. The elite—just 0.8% of travellers—occupied first-class compartments. In contrast, 94.5% of passengers squeezed into cramped third-class carriages: farmers, porters, pilgrims, and labourers who now moved with astonishing speed but little comfort.

Goods traffic told a similar story. Over 13 million maunds of merchandise were transported, a vast leap from 9.4 million the year before.

The obliteration of India's forests

Yet for all the railway's grandeur, it stood upon a slow-burning tragedy: the *obliteration of India's forests*. Lacking a steady coal supply, especially in the North-Western Provinces, the locomotives feasted on firewood. Wherever the rail extended, tree cover vanished like a fading

monsoon mist. By 1864, the locomotive department had burned through 40 lakh maunds of firewood—an estimated 2 lakh trees felled solely for steam. An additional 2.8 lakh trees were consumed in brick kilns, limeworks, and construction yards. Between Allahabad and Cawnpore, the landscape turned skeletal. Villages seven miles off were only beginning to feel the axe. “This denudation,” the officials admitted, “will continue until the railway reaches the Nerbudda coal fields.”

A government inquiry was ordered to assess the environmental toll. But nature was not the only victim of this metallic revolution.

At Howrah—the gateway to Calcutta—Mr. Power, Chief Engineer, sounded the alarm. The terminus, he wrote, was a disgrace: chaotic, inadequate, and incapable of handling the surging traffic. Plans for modern goods sheds had been shelved in favour of a “metropolitan station” in the city proper. But for now, goods rotted. Cotton spoiled. Tempers flared.

To ease the flood of traffic, plans were drawn to *double-track* the entire Calcutta–Allahabad route. Mr. Power’s engineers surveyed chord lines, salt depots, and coal spurs. Special attention was given to the Howrah Bonded Salt Warehouses—strategically located to ease the salt trade’s movement.

Meanwhile, a small but significant change took place inside the railcars themselves. Third-class coaches—long derided for their miserable conditions—were redesigned. A second tier of seats was removed to make room for more passengers. An *intermediate class* was introduced at 45 pies per mile, offering marginally better comfort. The trial began on the Calcutta–Raneegunge line.

But the air in the third-class compartments remained thick not just with sweat, but with indignity. At smaller stations, corruption reigned. “Extortions by the Amlah,” noted the *Bengal Hurkaru*, “are carried out to a most disgraceful extent.” One tale recounted a poor mango-seller blocked from boarding. Only after parting with two dozen of his best fruit did the basket find its way into the van. In another episode, a destitute man’s handful of small copper coins was rejected. “Bring proper change,” he was told. “Or offer a dustoor.” The man had none—and watched helplessly as the train roared past.

So ran the East Indian Railway—emblem of British progress, symbol of Indian suffering. It connected cities and divided classes. It transported wealth even as it stripped the land. But most of all, it raced forward with a momentum no one could quite control.