

Title—Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900
Author—Ian J. Kerr
Year—1995

Categories: Empire, Technology, Class, Economics
Place: British Raj
Time: 1850-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Ian J. Kerr's *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900* strives to answer the question: how the British got the railways of the Raj built so quickly and economically. He highlights how in a fifty-year period India went from having no railways to an extensive system that crossed through the subcontinent. Using a Marxist perspective, Kerr is concerned with how, from the perspective of colonial management, particular work processed organized and directed. Kerr claims that the British were the true mental laborers and organizers of the project, and therefore chooses to only focus on that perspective. He seeks to capture the **diversity of managerial methods** utilized by the British during this period, with a Marxist lens of analysis. In part, Kerr seeks to demonstrate the evolution towards advanced capitalism brought by the British to Indian through the construction of railways.

Kerr organizes his book around different concepts of the construction process, including patterns of ownership and control, as well as the role of contractors and laborers. He acknowledges that the majority of the physical labor required to construct the railways came from Indian workers. Kerr notes that these workers were not passive participants in the labor process, even dedicating a chapter to the issue of worker resistance. However, he emphasizes that his book is **not concerned with worker agency**, but overtly focused on how the British colonial state got the railways built. Therefore, even the sections dedicated to discussions of the workers are written from the perspective of British colonials. These sections make up around half of the book, with chapters focused on working conditions and worker resistance that do not consider the agency of the workers in question.

He attempts to identify patterns of ownership, coordination, and control of the labor process. Kerr highlights how a standard feature of advanced capitalism is the separation of ownership and control, but in the case of India the Government of India was heavily involved in the supervision, control, ownership, and operation of the railways. Kerr argues that the railways of India connected India's economy and quickly became an integral part of the life and landscape of India. He claims that the GOI was the unifying part of the entire railway construction process during the period of 1850 to 1900. In answering his question of how the British got the railways built, he concludes it was through the use of Indian labor and Indian intermediaries to control said labor. He notes that overtime the British got better at managing these intermediaries as British knowledge of the cultural of the subcontinent grew. In particular, he highlights how the British effectively utilized the different castes to their advantage, especially the traditional earth working castes. Kerr concludes that railway construction in colonial India extended and deepened the presence of capitalist labor markets.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- British managed the construction at a macro-level, with subcontracted Indians directly commanding the labor of other Indian workers
- Overtly focused on the managerial process of the British, not interested in the actual workers