

Volume 2: Chapter 9

Source 9.2

Mohandas Gandhi on Railroads, 1909

In 1909, Mohandas Gandhi published a book called Indian Home Rule, which discussed his views on a variety of topics including British colonial rule, Indian national independence, modernity, industrialization, mechanization, religious, and morality. It was banned by the British government in 1910. Gandhi was born in Gujarat and was a practicing Hindu. He studied law in England and worked in South Africa for two decades. When he returned to India in 1914, he became a leading anti-colonial activist and led India's national independence movement. In this text he constructs a conversation between a "Reader", who represents the common Indian perspective, and "Editor," who represents Gandhi's viewpoints. In Chapter 9, he discusses the condition of British India, focusing on the topic of railways.

Chapter 9: The Condition of India (Continued): Railways

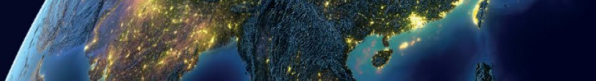
Reader: You have deprived me of the consolation I used to have regarding peace in India.

Editor: I have merely given you my opinion on the religious aspect, but when I give you my views as to the poverty of India, you will perhaps begin to dislike me because what you and I have hitherto considered beneficial for India no longer appears to me to be so.

Reader: What may that be?

Editor: Railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country so much so that, if we do not wake up in time, we shall be ruined.

Reader: I do now, indeed, fear that we are not likely to agree at all. You are attacking the very institutions which we have hitherto considered to be good.



Editor: It is necessary to exercise patience. The true inwardness of the evils of civilization you will understand with difficulty. Doctors assure us that a consumptive clings to life even when he is about to die. Consumption does not produce apparent hurt—it even produces a seductive colour about a patient's face so as to induce the belief that all is well. Civilization is such a disease and we have to be very wary.

Reader: Very well, then. I shall hear you on the railways.

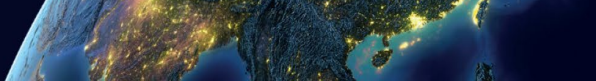
Editor: It must be manifest to you that, but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, the masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs.

Formerly we had natural segregation. Railways have also increased the frequency of famines because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain and it is sent to the dearest

markets. People become careless and so the pressure of famine increases. Railways accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very great difficulty. Generally, therefore, only the real devotees visited such places. Nowadays rogues visit them in order to practice their roguery.

Reader: You have given a one-sided account. Good men can visit these places as well as bad men. Why do they not take the fullest advantage of the railways?

Editor: Good travels at a snail's pace—it can, therefore, have little to do with the railways. Those who want to do good are not selfish, they are not in a hurry, they know that to impregnate people with good requires a long time. But evil has wings. To build a house takes time. Its destruction takes none. So the railways can become a distributing agency for the evil one only. It may be a debatable matter whether railways spread famines, but it is beyond dispute that they propagate evil.

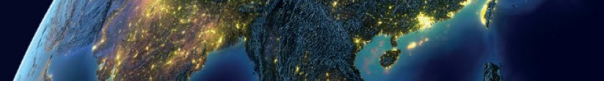


Reader: Be that as it may, all the disadvantages of railways are more than counterbalanced by the fact that it is due to them that we see in India the new spirit of nationalism.

Editor: I hold this to be a mistake. The English have taught us that we were not one nation before and that it will require centuries before we become one nation. This is without foundation. We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently they divided us.

Reader: This requires an explanation.

Editor: I do not wish to suggest that because we were one nation we had no differences, but it is submitted that our leading men travelled throughout India either on foot or in bullock-carts. They learned one another's languages and there was no aloofness between them. What do you think could have been the intention of those farseeing ancestors of ours who established Setubandha (Rameshwar) in the South, Jagannath in the East and Hardwar in the North as places of pilgrimage? You will admit they were no fools. They knew that worship of God could have been performed just as well at home. They taught us that those whose hearts were aglow with righteousness had the Ganges in their own homes. But they saw that India was one undivided land so made by nature. They, therefore, argued that it must be one nation. Arguing thus, they established holy places in various parts of India, and fired the people with an idea of nationality in a manner unknown in other parts of the world. And we Indians are one as no two Englishmen are. Only you and I and others who consider ourselves civilized and superior persons imagine that we are many nations. It was after the advent of railways that we began to believe in distinctions, and you are at liberty now to say that it is through the railways that we are beginning to abolish those distinctions. An opium-eater may argue the advantage of opium-eating from the fact that he began to understand the evil of the opium habit after having eaten it. I would ask you to consider well what I had said on the railways.



Reader: I will gladly do so, but one question occurs to me even now. You have described to me the India of the pre-Mahomedan period, but now we have Mahomedans, Parsis and Christians. How can they be one nation? Hindus and Mahomedans are old enemies. Our very proverbs prove it. Mahomedans turn to the West for worship, whilst Hindus turn to the East. The former look down on the Hindus as idolaters. The Hindus worship the cow, the Mahomedans kill her. The Hindus believe in the doctrine of non-killing, the Mahomedans do not. We thus meet with differences at every step.

Source: Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule* (Madras: S. Ganesan, 1922): 32-35.

- Why is Gandhi critical of railways? Specifically, what are his arguments? Which arguments do you think are convincing? Which are unconvincing, and why?
- Gandhi argues that "railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country." What is his reasoning for including railways in this list of harmful institutions? How does this challenge ideas about technological progress?
- How do you interpret Gandhi's comparison of civilization to consumption (tuberculosis)? What does this metaphor reveal about his view of modernity?