Colonialism, Development, and the Environment
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COLONIALISM, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT
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Summary: “This book focuses on the colonial encounter between Britain and India in the field of economic development, including scientific/technological changes, and the environmental impact of this encounter on India. Through the institutions of the colonial state, Das argues, the metropole (Britain) initiated economic development strategies in the colony (India) in order to efficiently extract resources from it. While colonial encounters have been seen by scholars more or less in economic and political terms, what is largely missing is the fact that the metropole’s economic development strategies had definite ecological consequences for the colony. This book aims to fill that gap with an examination of how the railways led to deforestation in colonial India. The deforestation, in turn, put at risk the entire project of railway expansion. This led to state implementation of forest conservation. Conservation, however, was also an economic-developmental project whose main aim was to maintain timber supplies for the railways rather than care for ecological concerns. Thus the history of colonialism has both economic (and political) as well as ecological dimensions”— Provided by publisher.

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For Baba and Maa
In gratitude
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Dr. Pallavi Das has given us an important and pioneering study that integrates aspects of environmental and colonial history through a specific examination of railway-driven deforestation in the Punjab Province of British India. Railways were and remain at the infrastructural centre of India. Railway construction on the Indian sub-continent began in 1850 and construction and reconstruction has gone on continually ever since. The soon-to-be completed Kashmir Railway is a major example of current construction. The first section of operating line officially opened in April 1853. By 1900 the rail network exceeded 23,000 route miles, the world’s fourth longest, operated by 338,041 permanent employees along which over 165 million passengers and some 42 million net tons of goods were carried in the reporting year 1899-1900. Jump forward to the second decade of the twenty-first century and Indian Railways, now a mammoth state-owned and state-operated system, has a route mileage exceeding 40,000 miles and 1.4 million permanent employees. Roughly one billion passengers travel by train on an annual basis, as do some 950 million tonnes of revenue earning freight traffic. 7000 plus passenger trains operate every day.

These impressive statistics highlight the transportation dimensions of the ways in which the railways were and are central to India and the lives of its inhabitants. Indeed, some historians have gone so far as to pose the question, “No Railways, No India”? But India did have railways, indeed it was an early entrant into the railway age, so regardless of the analytical benefits of pursuing that counterfactual, historians need to describe and to analyze the actual consequences of over one-hundred and fifty years of railway building and operation in South Asia. This
history, of course, was until 1947 a colonial history so any understanding of India’s railway past has to be informed by the fact of British rule. Clearly, the British introduced railways to India to facilitate colonial rule—militarily and administratively—and to benefit the Anglo-Indian commercial connection.

Some of those consequences have been more extensively studied than others. Studies of railway labour, both for construction and for the operating lines, have been published. The economic consequences of railway operation have long been the object of sophisticated and detailed investigation so we know a good deal about topics as diverse as a railway-driven, improved integration of pan-Indian markets in food grains to estimates of the extent to which railways increased agricultural income across the 235 districts into which most of British India was divided, 1870-1930. The roles the railways played in the creation and sustenance of the Indian nation and/or forms of regional identity, has interested other scholars while yet others have examined the ways in which the railways entered India’s cultural domain and became represented in a variety of visual, textual and aural media.

However, and it is a major caveat, the environmental consequences of railway construction and operation have been little studied despite a clear recognition by contemporary observers from the 1850s onwards that the railways had significant, negative environmental impacts. Even in the late 20th century the building of the 471-mile Konkan Railway along the narrow, coastal littoral of Western India below the Western Ghats raised environmental concerns.

In short, a topic of great importance has been neglected. A few articles have been published and some description of the environmental consequences of the railroads appears in works that do not have the railways as their main focus. Book-length studies that place the environmental consequences of the railways at the centre of the research and analysis do not exist—or at least did not exist until Dr. Pallavi Das provided this excellent study of Colonialism, Development, and the Environment: Railways and Deforestation in British India, 1860-1884.
This is a most welcome study that provides much more than a narrow account of railways and deforestation in the Punjab over a twenty-four year period. A strength of the book is its contextualization of the environmental consequences of the railways both with respect to causes and outcomes. Dr. Das describes the developmental goals of the colonial state that led first to the project of railways for India and then to the protection of that project when it became evident to some colonial authorities that railway-driven deforestation was threatening the supply of wood for sleepers and fuel needed to keep the railways going. Particularly interesting in this regard is chapter five where we find an account of the influential role played by one colonial scientist, Dr. Hugh Cleghorn, in developing a recognition of the causes of deforestation and to the establishment of a program of forest conservancy designed to safeguard the developmental projects of the colonial state.

I hope that this book will be followed by others in which Dr. Das will extend her research to cover other aspects of the contextualized, environmental history of India’s colonial and post-colonial railways so that a well-rounded understanding of the positive and negative features of this important subject can be incorporated into the history of the making of modern India.

Ian Kerr
University of Manitoba
Acknowledgments

This book and some of its ideas took a material form at the Ohio State University, Columbus, where as a doctoral student I was exposed to high-quality scholarly works not only in history but also in human geography. I will always remain grateful to the professors who taught me there, including Professors Stephen Dale and Claire Robertson.

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I dedicate this book to my parents for instilling in me the love of nature and of books.
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Maps
Map 1  British India (Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library, http://dsal.uchicago.edu).