

Connectivity, Ecology, and Exploitation: Railways in the Narmada River Valley in Nineteenth-Century Central India

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Abstract

On 7 March 1870, Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India, inaugurated the North-Eastern Extension of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway at Jabalpur in the Central Provinces of India, completing the task of direct rail connectivity between Bombay and Calcutta. A significant portion of this railway line passed through the valley of the river Narmada. The Narmada Valley was one of the most diverse and prosperous landscapes of the Indian subcontinent. Situated between the Vindhya and Satpura ranges in Central India, the Narmada Valley provided rich, fertile ground for the cultivation of crops such as wheat and cotton. It was also an essential location for the availability of minerals like coal and iron. The present article aims to examine the relationship between railways and the ecology of the Narmada Valley during the nineteenth century. The surveys and reports prepared by colonial officials, engineers, and geologists were crucial for designing new transportation infrastructure in the region, led by railways. The article traces the role of forests and mineral resources in the construction and operation of railways in the Narmada Valley. It also highlights the exploitation of agricultural and other natural resources that took place after the construction of railway tracks and feeder roads in the valley and nearby regions of Central India. The article will help unravel the dynamics of colonial railway development in the topographical landscapes offered by India's river valleys.

Keywords: Central India; ecological resources; railways; river valley