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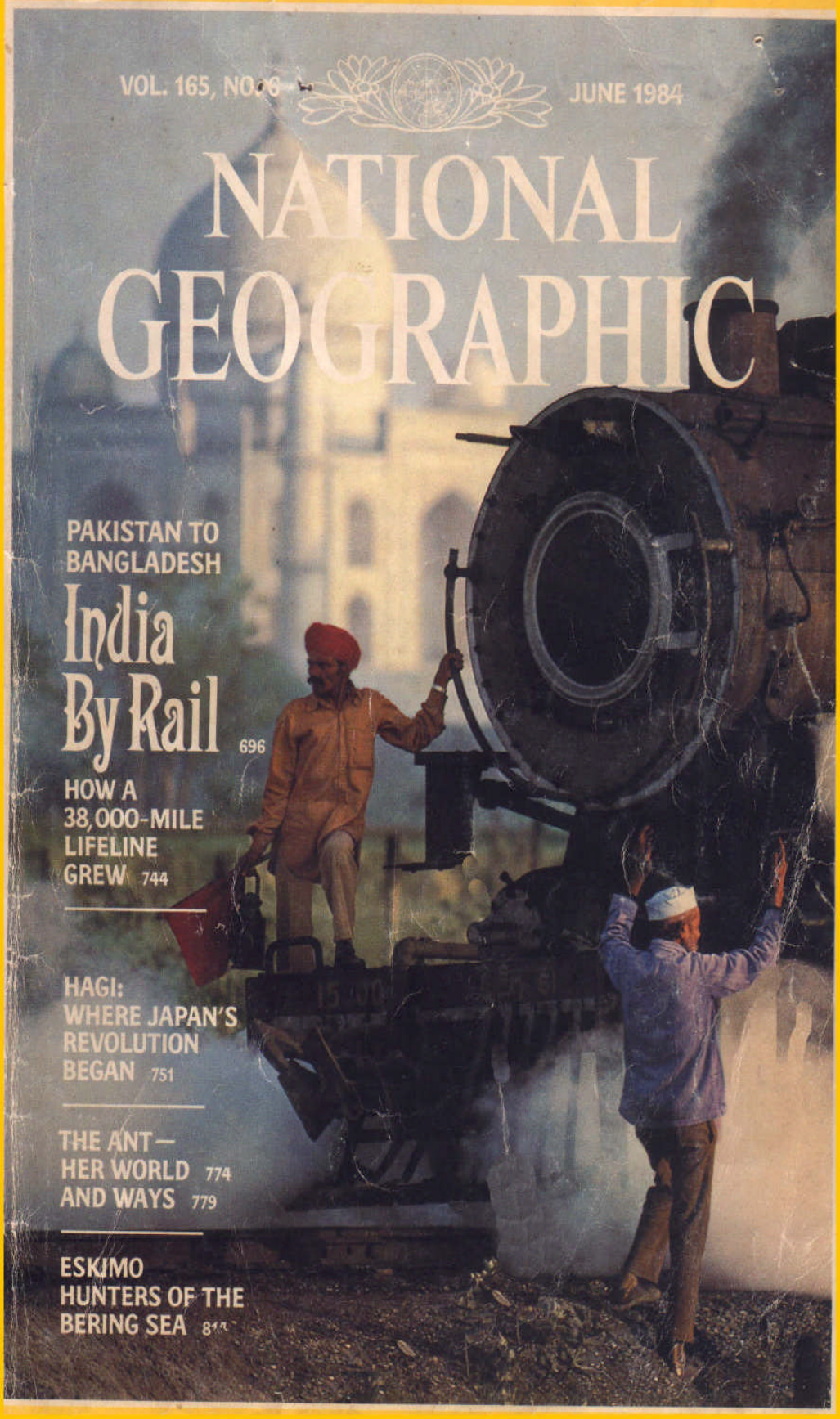

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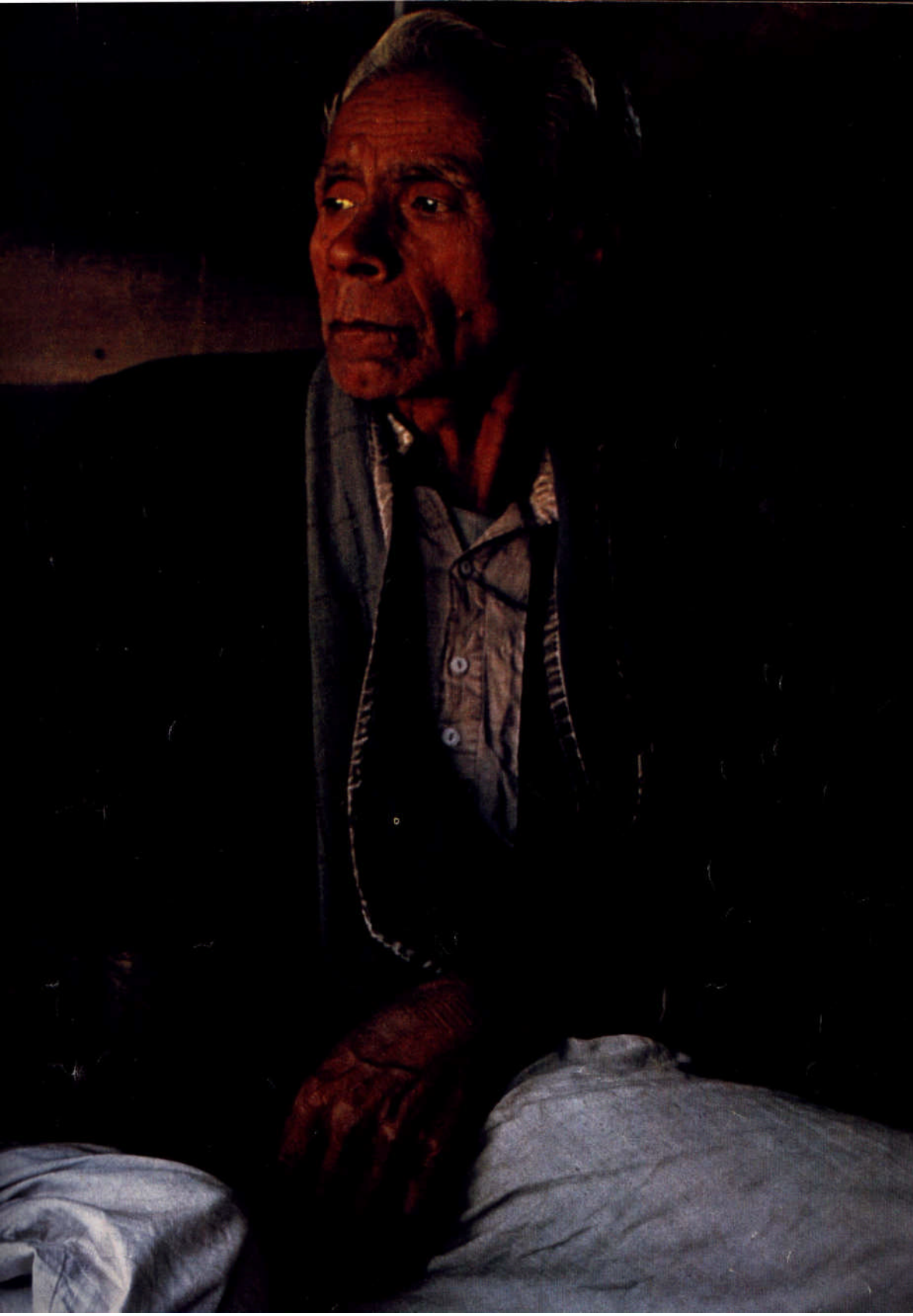
By Rail Across the Indian Subcontinent

By PAUL THEROUX
Photographs by STEVE McCURRY

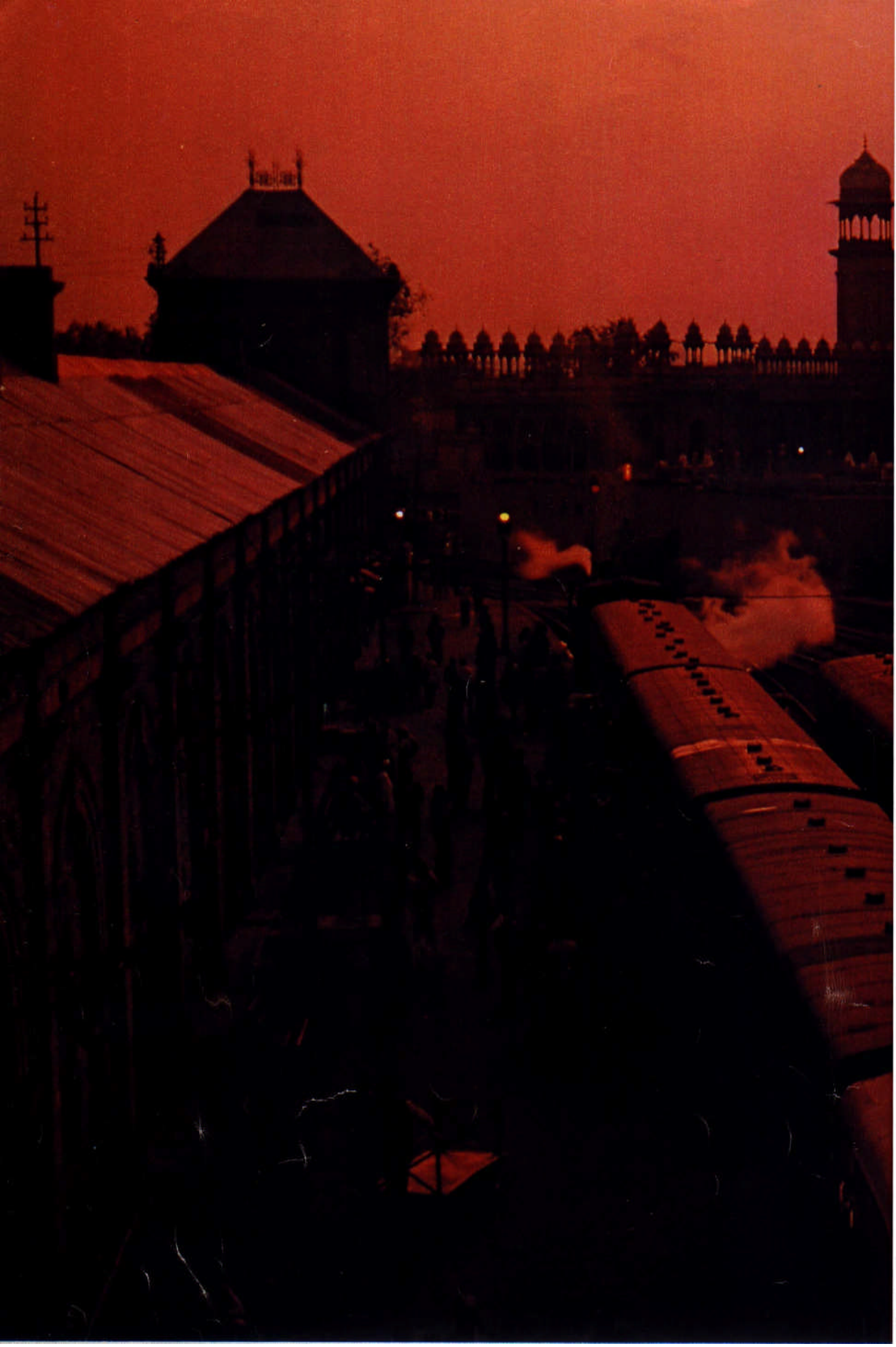
BREAKFAST *between Peshawar and Lahore is a dizzy adventure for bearers who pass trays between the dining car and first class, where locked inside doors assure security. Inherited from Britain in 1947 and unequaled for presenting a pageant of humanity, an epic rail system takes the author from the Khyber Pass to Bangladesh. He rekindles some memories—warts and all—that helped inspire his best-selling work* The Great Railway Bazaar.

It takes a narrow-gauge iron horse to negotiate these Himalaya foothills. It took iron men to blast 103 tunnels through

Last *ride with a pet clouds the face of a farmer's son* taking *the Varanasi-to-Calcutta train a few miles to market*



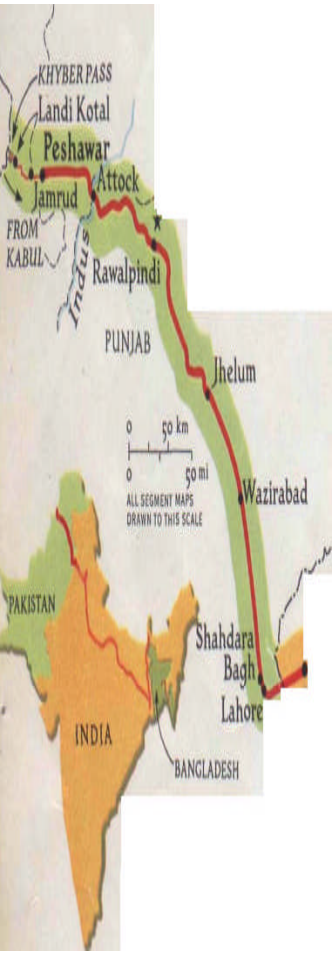
to sell *the goat. The railway is an indispensable fixture of Indian life, carrying 3.7 billion passengers a year.*



Into scenes of "temple India" the trains also bring tourists. At Agra Fort station, where a cartop attendant adjusts a ventilator,

hey see domes and minarets of the Jama Masjid, a mosque completed in 1648 under Mogul Emperor Shahjahan.

FROM PESHAWAR



INDIA. How does this vast overpopulated subcontinent manage to run, and even to prosper? For 130 years the chief reason has been the railway. Dusty and monumental, its trains often seem as ancient as India itself. In Pakistan they look like part of the landscape. An old reliable network of track brings hope to beleaguered Bangladesh.

Much of Indian life is lived within sight of the tracks or the station, and often next to the tracks, or inside the station. The railway was one of the greatest imperial achievements of the British raj, and now, a larger system than ever in a subcontinent divided into sovereign nations, it still has the powerful atmosphere of empire about it.

I had happy memories of the trains of India, and after a ten-year absence I wanted to return and to trace a line from the Khyber Pass in Pakistan, and through India, to Chittagongin Bangladesh, taking as many trains as possible.

rom the corner seat in a railway car I could see an enormous amount of this land: moving east from the stony cliffs of the North-West Frontier in Pakistan, crossing Punjab and the valleys of the Indus, then cutting into India on an express, traveling up and down, linking the hill stations of Simla and Darjeeling with the long straight journeys of the plains—via Delhi, the Taj Mahal, and the holy city of Varanasi on the Ganges. After Calcutta I could nip into Bangladesh to the end of the line (map, page 747).

The statistics associated with Indian Railways are elephantine (ten million passengers a day, 11,000 locomotives, 1.6 million workers), but the memorable details are simple enough: It is self-sufficient in rolling stock—India manufactures all her own coaches and engines— and it makes an operating profit of 12 percent revenue over expenditure. In many respects, India is one of the world's greatest railway nations—in total number of trains, stations, and longdistance travelers; and also in a negative sense, with the most cockroaches, the greatest number of rats living under railway platforms, the most forms to fill out, and some of the dirtiest sleeping cars. In India the railway is not merely a way of going to and from work, but rather a solution to the complex demands of the family's life. Birth, death, marriage, illness, and religious festivals all require witnesses and rituals that imply a journey home.

TO CHITTAGONG

I started in Pakistan, from Jamrud, a deserted station a short distance from Jamrud Fort, which, having been built in 1836, is just ninety years older than the Khyber Railway. It was an early morning in July, and very hot—the monsoon was weeks overdue.

Once a week the Khyber train descends the 3,500 feet from the highest point of the Khyber Pass, carrying the refugees and travelers who can afford the seven-rupee (35-cent) fare. The train is required to climb such steep inclines that it is powered by two steam engines—one at the front and one at the rear of the five coaches—both belching smoke and whistling as they make the journey to and from Landi Kotal.

"Once there was no trouble here," a man told me as we clattered across the plain. "There was no water, no trees. Only small villages. Then a dam was built and water came to the valley in a stream, and since then there has been constant fighting."

Tempers were very bad. Months of drought had scorched the face of the land and made it so hot that people had moved out of their houses and set up their string beds under trees. Men sat on the banks of the trickling stream beside the railway tracks and chatted keeping their feet in the water.

There were more than 35,000 people in the Kacha Garhi refugee camp, and nearly as many in the one at Nasir Bagh not far away. Driven from their homes in Afghanistan by the war, they lay in hammocks, they cooked under trees, they waited for the weekly shipment of food; they watched the train go by. Across ten miles of gravel are the high gray-brown mountains that mark the border of Afghanistan, and the black smoking train makes its way across the dead land.

This was always a tribal area, the people were always dressed like this, and always armed, the train was always pulled by smoking, screeching steam engines, and the nighttime noises were always human voices and the clopping hooves of the tonga ponies, and when—hours late—the train pulls into Peshawar Cantonment station, it is pitch dark and 110°F. Most people make straight for the bazaar.

"This is the Qissa Khawani Bazaar," said Ziarat Gul, a powerfully built and kindly soul who was known in Peshawar as "Gujjar—Buffalo Man." He was pointing at a labyrinth of alleys too narrow for anything larger than pony carts.

"This means the Storytellers' *Bazaar*. In the old times all the *kafilas* [caravans] came from Persia and Russia and Afghanistan, here to Peshawar. They told stories of their journeys."

Peshawar is once again a great destination. Now the travelers

Famed gorge reverberates *with the music of steam as a train, part of Pakistan's rail legacy from Britain, nears a tunnel in the Khyber Pass* ***(facingpage).*** *A second engine, out of sight at rear, helps power the train up grades.*

Near the Afghanistan border a Pathan tribesman (left) hefts a wrench used to tighten track bolts. While many Pathans work for the railway, too many of their Afghan kin are passengers fleeing combat between Soviet troops and Afghan fighters. Some three million refugees have sought shelter in Pakistan. Some of the homeless get no farther than the tracks, where refugee camps sprawl in a *bleak landscape.*

are Afghan refugees, and the stories in the *bazaar* concern the heroism of Pathans ambushing Soviet convoys. There are said to be more than three million refugees, and many of them bring goods and food to sell at the bazaar—carpets and jewelry, embroidery, leatherwork, cartridge belts, pistol holders, rifle slings, almonds, dates, prunes, and fresh fruit. The bazaar has never been busier or more full of hawkers. Everywhere are the beaky, craggy faces of the travelers, turbaned men and shrouded women, rifles and pistols, and the tea drinkers huddled around samovars—storytellers again.

I OCCUPIED an air-conditioned compartment on the *Khyber Mail,* and in its grumbling way the machinery actually worked. I was soon traveling under a bright moon through Nowshera and across the Indus River at Attock. We passed through Rawalpindi and Jhelum, too, but by then I was asleep.

Just before Wazirabad at dawn there was a knock on the door o my compartment. "You wanting breakfast?"

I could have been wrong, of course, but it seemed to be the same brisk man who had asked the same question ten years ago: He had the same bad eye, the same dirty turban, the same lined face. And the breakfast was the same as well—eggs, tea, bread on heav; stained crockery.

Scattered showers of the monsoon had begun to appear. The; darkened Lahore, once the princely city of Akbar and Shah Jahan now the capital of Punjab. It was cooler here, and the rice field had water in them; planting had begun; the grass was green. The soil was mostly clay, and so brickworks had sprung up, each one with a steeple-like chimney. Little girls, fully clothed, some look ing as young as six or seven, were digging mud and clay out of pits for bricks and carrying it in baskets on their heads. Meanwhile,

A very *careful shave* is *what a* barber gives his conspicuously *armed* customer in Pakistan's Peshawar Cantonment station ***(facing page)***.

Superintendent Abbas Afi Shah **(above)** boasts *of the* station's cleanliness—"The *few* that are clean realty stand out," *agrees photographer McCurry.*

Rail links between India and Pakistan were severed when war broke out in 1965 and remained *closed for 11 years. Trade is now brisk, with Indian iron ore and* pig iron rotting into Pakistani steet mills.

little boys played in the grass or swam in ditches. It appears the absurd custom of the country to require little girls modestly to remain clothed and do most of the laborious work, while naked boys can frolic all the livelong day.

The decrepitude near Shahdara Bagh was interesting, because not far from Shahdara station is one of Pakistan's most glorious buildings, the Tomb of Jahangir, with its vast park—grander than the Shalimar Gardens—and the marble mausoleum inlaid with gems; all of it in a perfect state of preservation.

WHEN INDIA was partitioned in 1947, so was the railway, but the trains didn't stop running until the 196S Indo-Pakistani war. For 11 years the steel rails connecting Wagah in Pakistan with Atari, the Indian border town, were silent. And then in 1976 the trains began to run again. Very little had changed on this line; the steam locomotives, like all steam locomotives in India, looked filthy, ancient, and reliable; they are great sooty thunder boxes, and there are 7,245 of them still operating in India. The coaches were battered, and the train was very slow. This was the *International Express.*

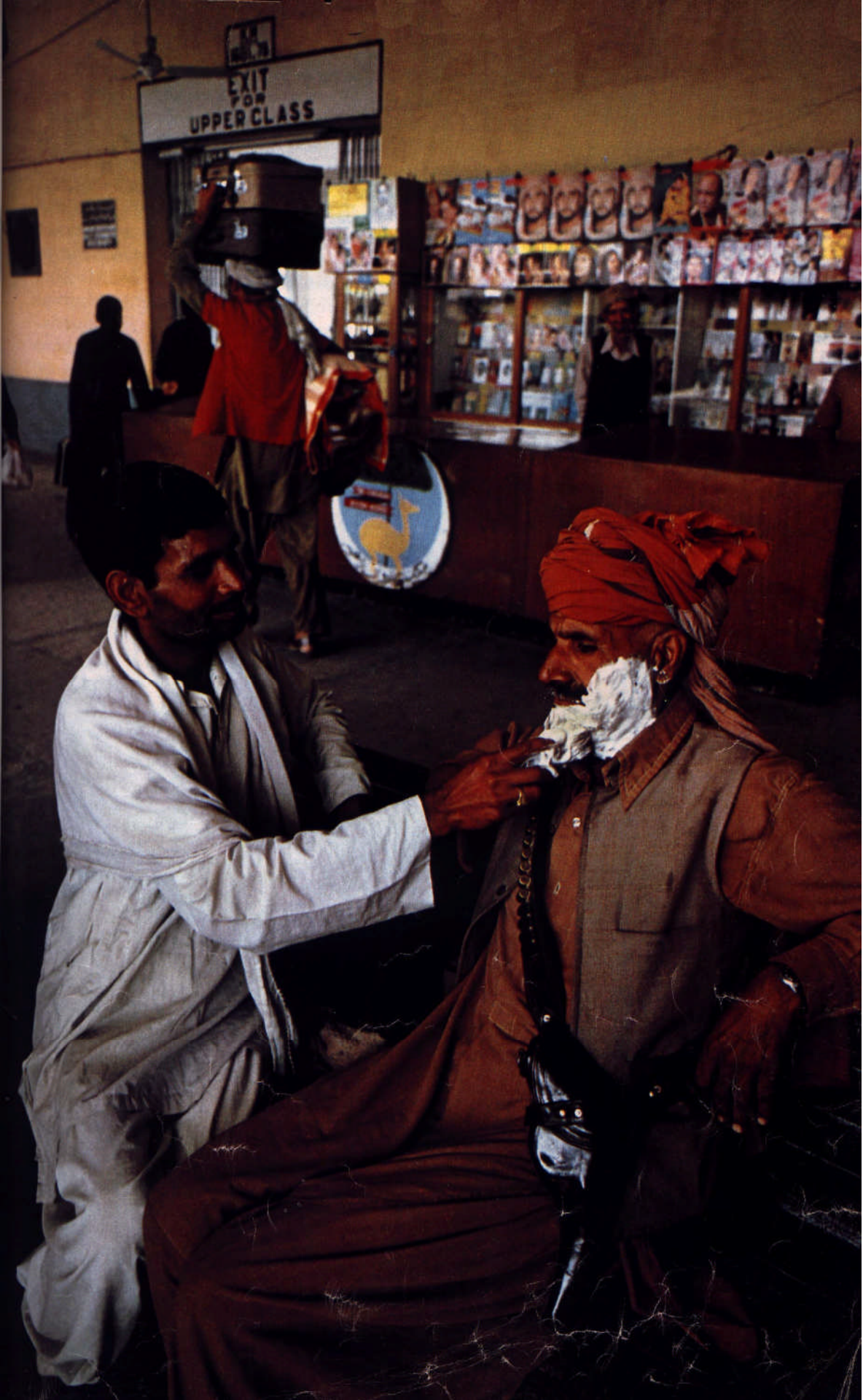
The train left on time, which surprised me, considering that the thousand or so people on board had all had their passports stamped and their luggage examined. We traveled across a plain toward India. After an hour every man we passed wore a turban, the symbolic headpiece of the Sikhs. We were nearing Amritsar, spiritual capital of the Sikhs, and as practically all Sikhs are named Singh, we were among the great family of Singhs.

Sikh is from the Sanskrit word *shishya,* meaning "disciple." The Sikhs are disciples of a tradition of ten gurus, beginning with 15th-century Guru Nanak, who taught monotheism, espoused meditation, and opposed the Hindu caste system. On the approaches to Amritsar, Sikhs herded goats, Sikhs dug in the fields, Sikhs processed the passengers on the *International Express.* At Atari station the operation took several hours: everyone ordered off the train, everyone lined up and scrutinized, everyone ordered back on. Then the whistle blew and the black smoke darkened the sky, and we proceeded into India.

But it was not only black smoke in the sky. The clouds were the color of cast iron; they were blue-black and huge. It is usually possible in India to tell whether it will rain from the whiteness of the egrets—they look whitest when rain is due—and these dozens flying up from the paddies near Amritsar were brilliantly white against the dark clouds massing over us.

We arrived just before one o'clock at Amritsar, and as our train pulled in, passing buffaloes and scattering the goats and ducks and children, the storm hit. It was the first rain of the monsoon—pelting gray drops, noisy and powerful and, only minutes after it had begun, already erupting from drains and streaming under the tracks. The rain in its fury put the Indians into a good mood. It was the sunny days and blue skies—intimations of drought—that made them bad tempered.

Because of the rain, only pedicabs were running in Amritsar. Automobiles lay stranded and submerged all over the inundated city. I sat inside, deafened by the rain, and studied the timetable,


EXIT
FOR
UPPER CLASS

and after a while I became curious about the route of a certain train out of Amritsar. This particular mail train left Amritsar at ten in the evening and headed south on the main line to Delhi; but halfway there it made a hairpin turn at Ambala and raced north to Kalka where, at dawn, it connected with the railcar to Simla. It was an extraordinary route—and a very fast train: Instead of going to bed in the hotel, I could reserve a sleeper, board the train, and more or less wake up in the foothills of the Himalayas, in Simla. It was not a popular train, *this Simla Mail.* Its odd twisted route was undoubtedly the result of the demands of the imperial postal service, for the British regarded letter writing and mail delivery as one of the distinguishing features of any great civilization. And Indians feel pretty much the same.

My sleeping car was unswept; like a cell, it had barred windows

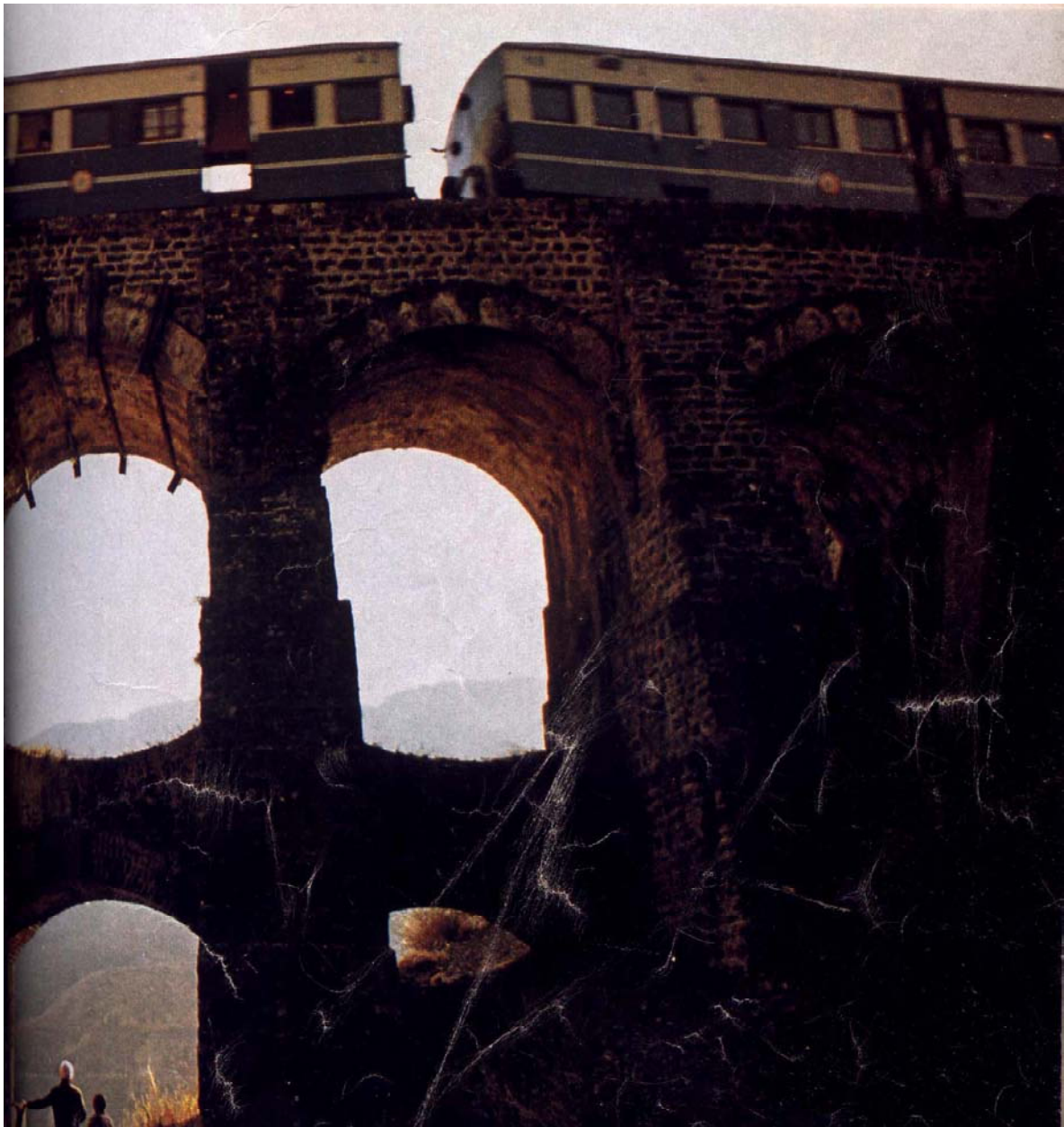
and a steel door. "Use the shutters," the ticket collector said, "and don't leave any small articles lying around."

The whistle of the *Simla Mail* drowned the sounds of music from the bazaar. I was soon asleep. But at midnight I was awakened by rain beating on the shutters. The monsoon that had hit Punjab only the day before had brought another storm, and the train struggled through it. The thick raindrops came down so hard they spattered through the slats and louvers in the shutters and a fine spray soaked the compartment floor.

The guard knocked on the door at 5:20 to announce that we had arrived at Kalka.

It was cool and green at Kalka, and after a shave in the Gentlemen's Waiting Room I was ready for the five-hour journey through the hills to Simla. I could have taken the small pottering *Simla Queen* or the express, but the white 20-seat railcar was already

Favorite *side trip,* *a train to Simla crosses a tiered masonry-arch bridge as Indians graze cattle below. Prior to train service in 1903 it took eight grueling hours by horse-drawn tonga to reach Simla, adored by Rudyard Kipling as a place "where all things begin and many come to an evil end."*



"Peopled Express" *means lots of people crammed into little space* ***(facing page).*** *They are expressly advised to be patient because service often runs hours late. Such* Janata *trains offer only no-frills second class.*

That India's strength lies in her poor is reflected by her railroad. Even in 1904 nearly 200 million rode lowest class on a system barely half a century old. Today second-class railway earnings outstrip others nearly tenfold, although the humblest fare averages about three-fourths of a cent a mile, among Asia's fewest.

waiting at the platform. I boarded, and snoozed, and woke to see mists lying across the hills and heavy green foliage in the glades beside the line.

Two hours later at 5,000 feet we came to the little station at Barog, where every day the railcar waits while the passengers have breakfast; and then it sets off again into the low tumbling cloud. Occasionally the cloud and mist were broken by a shaft of light, and parted to reveal a valley floor thousands of feet below.

The opinion of the Indian in the hill station is that the plains are disorderly and crime ridden: As soon as people climb above three or four thousand feet, they tend to behave themselves. The train guard at Simla station was full of complaints about lowland vandalism and tardiness and "mischief— especially political mischief" on the railways.

"You're very frank, sir," I said.

"It is because I have resigned," he replied.

The residents of Simla, where once the high officials of the raj and their ladies went to escape the hot season, are often visited by relatives. "They always say, Tm coming for two or three days,' but after three weeks they're still here. And there is something about this air that excites them and makes them difficult."

The man speaking was an army colonel. He had a remedy for unwelcome guests. He made lists of sights that were not to be missed in Simla. Each one was a day's walk from his house, and it was usually at the top of a steep hill. After a few days of this sightseeing, the starch was out of his guests, and they were fairly glad when it was time to go.

The most knowledgeable railway buff I met in Simla was a man who, over a period of years, had traveled all over India on trains, visiting racetracks. He seldom stayed overnight. He would hurry to Lucknow on a night train, gamble all day at the track, and then catch the sleeper to Calcutta and do the same thing. I said it seemed a difficult thing to do, all that railroading. No, he said, the difficult thing was putting on a sad face and hailing a tonga and then riding third class so that no potential thief would guess that he had 5,000 rupees of winnings in his pocket.

I GLIDED DOWN from Simla in the cozy little blue train to Kalka and then in the late evening boarded the sleeper for Delhi. It was air-conditioned, and the bed was made—starched sheets and a soft pillow. There was no better way to Delhi. The next morning I looked out the window and saw the outskirts of the city, simmering under the gray lid of the sky.

At Old Delhi station it seemed to me that the unluckiest railwayman in this season of heat was a fireman on a steam locomotive. As I rambled around the station yard, however, I discovered an even more exhausting job: boilermaker. The boilermaker is essentially a welder, but because he must deal with all aspects of the boiler, he is often required to use his welding torch inside the boiler or the firebox.

Today it was 103°F at the Old Delhi loco shed, but Suresh Baboo, a boilermaker, crawled out of a locomotive's firebox to tell me that he was not deterred by a little thing like heat.

He was a railwayman grade two and earned a thousand rupees a

Treated like maharajas, *who once possessed not only these elegant cars but their own* railways, *tourists dine in the Palace on Wheels. Pulled by a steam, engine*

named the Desert King *the train was restored for six million dollars to earn foreign exchange, often at the princely sum of 1,090 dollars for an eight-day trip.*

month ($100), of which four hundred was his "dearness allowance" ("because in Delhi, food and living are very dear"). Was this enough to live on? Not in Delhi. "We are asking for an increase in the dearness," said Suresh Baboo.

Near New Delhi I found the best organized railway station in India. This was Hazrat Nizamuddin station, just south of the city and a short walk from Humayun's Tomb.

There were flowers and shrubs in pots on the platform, and everyday on the orders of the stationmaster, G. L. Suri, ant powder was sprinkled along the walls. Mr. Suri proudly took me on a tour of the station. He hadn't been recommended to me by the Railway Board—I had simply stopped on one of the 180 trains that pass through each day and noticed how unusual it looked. How was it possible to keep a station so clean in the hot season?

Mr. Suri said, "I do my duty—I get satisfaction from it. Sometimes I work 16 hours a day. I do not accept excuses." He nodded and added softly, "And I am very tough."

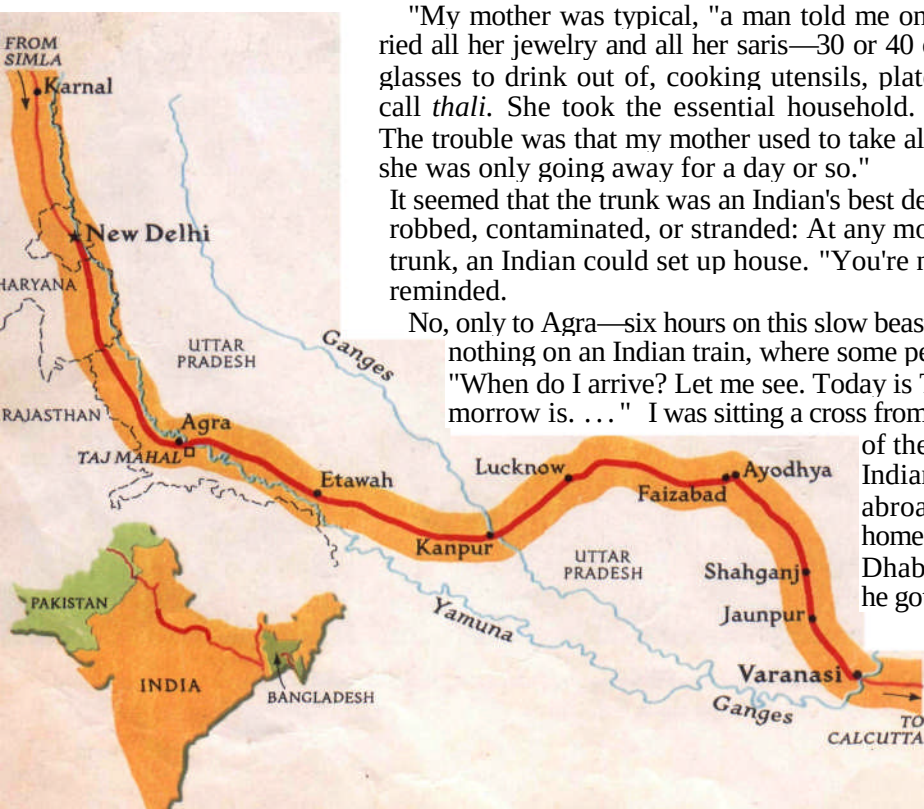
THE *Madras-Janata Express* passes through *Hazrat* Nizamuddin station without stopping, which is odd, because "Janata" means "people" and the "People's Express" stops everywhere. It is probably the slowest express in the world. It would be several days before this long rumbling steam train arrived in Madras. It was cheap, but it was not really meant for long-distance passengers; it went 1,400 miles, stopping at virtually every station—just like a country bus—and most people only went a few miles.

In India it is easy to tell the long-distance travelers. They are heavily laden and always carry a big steel trunk. At railway stations in India one sees the family grouped around the trunk—they sit on it, sleep beside it, use it for a table, and when their train draws in, they hire a skinny man to wrestle it on board.

"My mother was typical, "a man told me on this train. "She carried all her jewelry and all her saris—30 or 40 of them. She brought glasses to drink out of, cooking utensils, plates, and the trays we call *thali*. She took the essential household. All Indians do this. The trouble was that my mother used to take all these things even if she was only going away for a day or so."

It seemed that the trunk was an Indian's best defense against being robbed, contaminated, or stranded: At any moment, using the trunk, an Indian could set up house. "You're not going far," I was reminded.

No, only to Agra—six hours on this slow beast; but six hours was nothing on an Indian train, where some people might say, "When do I arrive? Let me see. Today is Thursday and tomorrow is. . . ." I was sitting a cross from Bansilal Bajaj, one of the great number of Indians who work abroad. Mr. Bajaj was on home leave from Abu Dhabi. Every two years he got



two months' leave, and he spent a month of that on Indian trains, going up and down the country. "In Abu Dhabi all we do is work," said Mr. Bajaj. "I am in the catering and cleaning business, but I am no more than a machine. When I come back to India, I am human again."

It was a lovely evening, very clear, just after a heavy rainstorm of the monsoon. Now there was not a cloud in the sky, and in the west it was the color of a tropical sea—greeny blue, reflected in perfectly still pools and paddy fields. There was a sweetness in the air and for a number of miles no people—just color and empty space and darting birds.

Bearing any burden, corps *of vendors haunt the stations. In New Delhi a porter balances the luggage of first-class travelers to Agra (left). Licensed by Indian Railways and identified by red jackets and brass tags, porters usually sell their services for the equivalent of 20 cents a bag. For readers a bookseller (above) hawks a pile of current titles.* Vendors *offer food and trinkets of every kind, including the great Indian status symbol, sunglasses.*

A deep *breath* *helps one survive in New Delhi, as second-class passengers cram themselves and their belongings onto the* Assam. Mail (right). *Of such competition, photographer McCurry found, advantage can be taken. "As a train nears a station," he says, "a group of guys will jump on and take the seats of passengers getting ready to leave the train. Then the guys auction the seats off to the new passengers getting on." Failure to get a seat can mean standing for eight hours or more. Resting up for her journey, a* woman awaits *her train near New Delhi* ***(facing page).*** *But such hardships of second class appear outweighed by rewards—the ability to commute, to worship, and to join family in myriad celebrations.*

Just after dark the lights in the train failed, and we traveled clattering through pitch-blackness, with the steam engine puffing and wheezing and the whistle blowing off-key. Sparks from the smokestack sailed past the window like fireflies.

It was almost nine by the time we arrived in Agra. The town is nothing. The Agra Fort is substantial. Akbar's Mausoleum at nearby Sikandra has character, and the Moti Masjid (the Pearl Mosque) has personality; but the Taj Mahal is something else. Just looking at it, you are certain that you will never forget it. It is not merely a visual experience, but an emotional one—its pure symmetry imparts such strong feeling; and it is a spiritual experience, too, for the Taj Mahal is alone among buildings I have seen. It is not merely lovely; it looks as if it has a soul.

ON THE *Ganga-Yamuna Express* to Varanasi, it was a long night. There was no bedding, no food, no water; hot cinders blew in the window; even first class was filthy. Dawn broke at Kanpur, and two hours later at Lucknow it was very sunny and bright, a noontime heat, though it was hardly half past seven in the morning.

All the paddy fields were brim full. The rains were dangerously strong in Hardwar and had flooded Delhi, but here beside the line of the *Ganga-Yamuna Express* they had guaranteed a great rice crop and had given the landscape a serene lithographed look—the palms very still, the buffaloes obedient, the Indians up to their shins in water. An emblematic mother carrying her infant weeded vegetables in the middle of another field under the shade of a big black umbrella.

For miles, for hours—for days on these plains—you see nothing else at this time of year; men, women, and children planting or

plowing or tending the crop, and all of them working under the blazing sun and burned as black as their buffaloes.

The villages were mud huts and grass roofs, like a glimpse of central Africa in the state of Uttar Pradesh, except that in the center of every frail village was always a substantial stone temple. None of these villages were signposted, but sometimes a tiny station or a halt displayed the name. We were going the long way to Varanasi, taking the "Faizabad Loop," via Ayodhya, where monkeys on the platform sat on the inkblots of shade. At Shahganj, rice planters stood scanning the blue sky for clouds.

VARANASI STATION has the contours of a Hindu temple, and like a temple it is filled with holy men and pilgrims. It is also full of sacred cows. The cows at Varanasi station are wise to the place—they get water at the drinking fountains, food near the refreshment stalls, shelter along the platforms, and exercise beside the tracks; they also know how to use the crossover bridges and climb up and down the steepest stairs. "We are installing cow-catchers," the station superintendent told me—but he did not mean the traditional ones, on the engines; he meant fences to prevent the cows from entering the station.

Varanasi, for Hindus, is a most holy place to die, or failing that, to be cremated beside the river. Also, Buddha preached his first sermon nearby; the Jains, too, have their own reasons for revering Varanasi. It is the goal of many pilgrimages. Here the beggars are testing the piety of the pilgrims; and those small narrow bundles that are being carried through the streets are in fact human corpses, headed for the cremation fires on the ghats.

Because nothing that is holy in India can be regarded as dirty, holy Varanasi with its thousand temples is one of the filthiest of Indian cities and positively stinking with sanctity. I met an Indian medical student who had just arrived in Varanasi. He was on his way to the Ganges to take his ritual bath. He said he was definitely planning to bathe in the Ganges, among dead goats and monkeys and the occasional corpse of a beggar who died at the station and was taken to the river and thrown in.

"Oh, yes," the medical student said. "I will immerse myself."

"What about the health aspect?" He said, "It is a question of mind over matter." That was not the only contradiction I saw in Varanasi. Nailed to a wall that was smeared with betel juice was the sign SPITTING IN PUBLIC IS INJURIOUS TO HEALTH.

Timeless ***scene*** *in a time of change. Men and women wash their clothes by the Yamuna River as a train thunders toward Agra on a double-decked bridge carrying a roadway below. For railroad buffs India remains a land of bliss because steam engines still account for nearly two-thirds of its fleet. But now they work the short hauls, while diesel and electric locomotives carry more than 80 percent of both freight and passenger traffic.*

One-man parade, *a line inspector pushed by his retinue rolls past j\qra's Taj Mahal during a check for wear and tear on the rails. While serious derailntents are rare, mishaps caused by overcrowding—hanging out* windows, *riding the roof—are all too common on urban lines.*

From a distance in the early morning Varanasi looks wonderful, and the most glorious sight of it is from the express to Howrah as it crosses the Dufferin Bridge that spans the Ganges just east of the city. From the high vantage point of the bridge, the whole populous riverbank and all the ghats can be seen gilded in the light of the rising sun, and the city's splendor is intensified because the distance hides its decay, and at this time of day—the early morning—the river is filled with the pious, washing, swimming, and generally going about their prayers.

The Howrah express, one of India's best trains, leaves Varanasi at 5 :30 in the morning, just as the passengers from Delhi are yawning and peering out the windows and getting their first glimpses of

the holy city. And the people waiting on the platform at Varanasi are watching the train with admiration, because this train represents luxury—it has three chair cars, and sleeping cars, and a pantry car, where food is cooked and dished up in trays that are distributed around the train by waiters. The Howrah express is efficiently air-conditioned; it is famous for being fast, and it is practically always on time.

From here—the outskirts of Varanasi all the way to Calcutta—the land is waterlogged and fertile, an endless rice field. At noon the train stops at Gaya, near where Buddha received enlightenment. Gaya also marks the beginning of a very strange landscape. Sudden hills are thrust out of the flatness like massive dinosaurs

petrified on the flat Bihari plain; and other hills are like pyramids, and still more like slag heaps. They don't seem to belong to any range of hills, and they have a comic plopped-down look.

It was wet and cool and jungly four hours later when we entered West Bengal, and when the train stopped, some blind beggars got on. The ticket examiner asked them to beg in a different part of the train, and they meekly agreed.

This ticket examiner was a woman—one of three or four women who work on the train. Her given name was Ollie

Frances. "I was a Christian," she said. "But then I married Mr. Ningam for love, and so I became a Hindu. It was for the children's sake; it would have been too confusing for them otherwise."

Mrs. Ningam had seven children, the eldest eighteen, the youngest five. She missed them when she made this Calcutta run, but her relatives helped look after them. She had worked for the railways for 20 years.

What Mrs. Ningam liked best about the Howrah express was its speed—less than 14 hours from Varanasi to Calcutta. As the train drew into Howrah station, the daylight was extinguished by smoke and rain mixed with fog; frightening numbers of people were making their way through the mud and lamplight.

On a real milk run, *villagers riding to market between Varanasi and Calcutta hang bulky cans of milk outside the train* ***(facing page)****, thus avoiding delay in wrestling them on and off. In Kanpur station a cow's sanctity gives it free rummage in the trash* ***(above).***

On this railway line dogs sleep between the tracks, and children play on the tracks and roll toys along them, and the tracks are also put to practical use by men who push huge logs along them—skidding them downhill on the rails.

The four coaches are nearly always full, if not with legitimate travelers then with joyriders—the train is part of the life of the long series of mountainsides en route to Darjeeling. Some people only ride a hundred yards, others are going miles. The toy train is full of businessmen, farmers, Buddhist monks, and schoolchildren. Every ticket is made out in duplicate, though none of them costs more than a few cents.

The train passes by the houses, a few familiar inches from the windows. A boy reaches out and plucks a flower from the embankment covered with blue hydrangeas, yellow primroses, carnations, and ros,es, and hands it to a woman in a shop.

The valleys and these hillsides are open to the distant plains, and so the traveler on the toy train has a view that seems almost unnatural , it is so dramatic. At Sonada it is like standing at the heights of a gigantic outdoor amphitheater and looking down and seeing the plains and the rivers, roads and crops printed upon it and flattened by the yellow heat. There are wisps and whorls of cloud down there too. But up here it is dark green, wet hill country. Nearly everyone has rosy cheeks.

AFTER SONADA we came to Jor Bungalow station and then to Ghum, the highest railway station on the subcontinent at 7,407 feet. The mist shifts slightly, and farther along, toward Darjeeling, it is possible on a clear day to see the long irregular ridge of Kanchenj unga, massively white in the great folds of snow-covered rock.

The so-called Batasia Loop is the famous descent in which the train appears to be tying itself into a knot while at the same time whistling impatiently to clear its own caboose out of the way. After two complete spirals the train continues on its way, gliding into Darjeeling, still following the main road and bumping past the shops and sharing the thoroughfare with the Buddhist monks and the bullock carts.

Darjeeling, also a famous hill station, is unlike Simla. It is not an Indian resort but rather a Nepalese town. It is a solemn place, full of schools and convents and monasteries. It is barer than Simla, not as populous; it is muddier, friendlier, rather un-Indian in aspect. Simla has visitors, Darjeeling has residents; Simla is Anglo-Indian, but Darjeeling is Oriental. It is not posh. Darjeeling is a hospitable place.

The curse of the town is its traffic—an endless procession of honking jeeps and trucks. It seemed to me that Darjeeling's traffic problem could be solved with an updated version of the railway, which was completed a hundred years ago. The train was a great solution then, and it still serves the town, for many people commute from places like Ghum to jobs in Darjeeling—to the shops, to the government offices, and even to the stranger occupations in Darjeeling such as the carver of yak bones and the clerk who stands under the sign Licensed Vendor for Ganja & Bhang. Ten grams of ganja (marijuana)—30 cents.

The tram badly needs to be improved, but of course the wonder of it—like the wonder of much else m India—is that it still operates . India is a complex place. The phones seldom work, the mail is unreliable, the electricity is subject to sudden stoppages. There are numerous natural disasters, and there are 700 million people. It seems almost inconceivable that this country is still viable, and yet there are times when one gets glimpses of its greatness. Near the^ end of my Indian journey I decided that India runs primarily because of the railway. It is an old-fashioned solution, but India has old-fashioned problems.

INDIA'S relations with Bangladesh could not be described as warm; perhaps on the theory propounded by Robert Frost that good fences make good neighbors, India has recently announced its plan to secure its national boundary with Bangladesh with a 1,500-mile barbed-wire fence.

Passenger trains have not crossed the border for some time. I flew to Dhaka (Dacca) and took the *Ulka Express* east and south toward Chittagong. The *Ulka Express*, 15 coaches long—one was first class—was pulled by a diesel engine. I would have gone second class, but I would not have gotten a seat, and I was not prepared to stand for nine hours.

This train was on the world news the day I boarded it: It was the only link between Dhaka and Chittagong. Every other road was under five feet of water, and scores of people had drowned in the torrential rains. But the monsoon comes every year to Bangladesh, and it is always severe. Its damage comes so regularly it is not remarkable. The feeling on the *Ulka Express* was that Bangladesh was having another unlucky week. It was not immediately obvious that the rain was a disaster. Today the sun was shining, and this whole southern part of Bangladesh had been turned into a spectacular lake—hundreds of miles of floodwater. And the only things showing above all that water were the long straight rails of the track.

Moral strictures *trumpeted in stations* ***(right)*** *do little to deter that wily and ubiquitous Indian species, the fare dodger. Last year a two-week crackdown caught 90,000 passengers without tickets, prosecuted 10,000, jailed 5,000, and recouped millions of rupees in lost revenue. But on a branch line to Calcutta, farmers see nothing wrong with grabbing a free ride to take their hay a short distance to market* ***(facing page).***

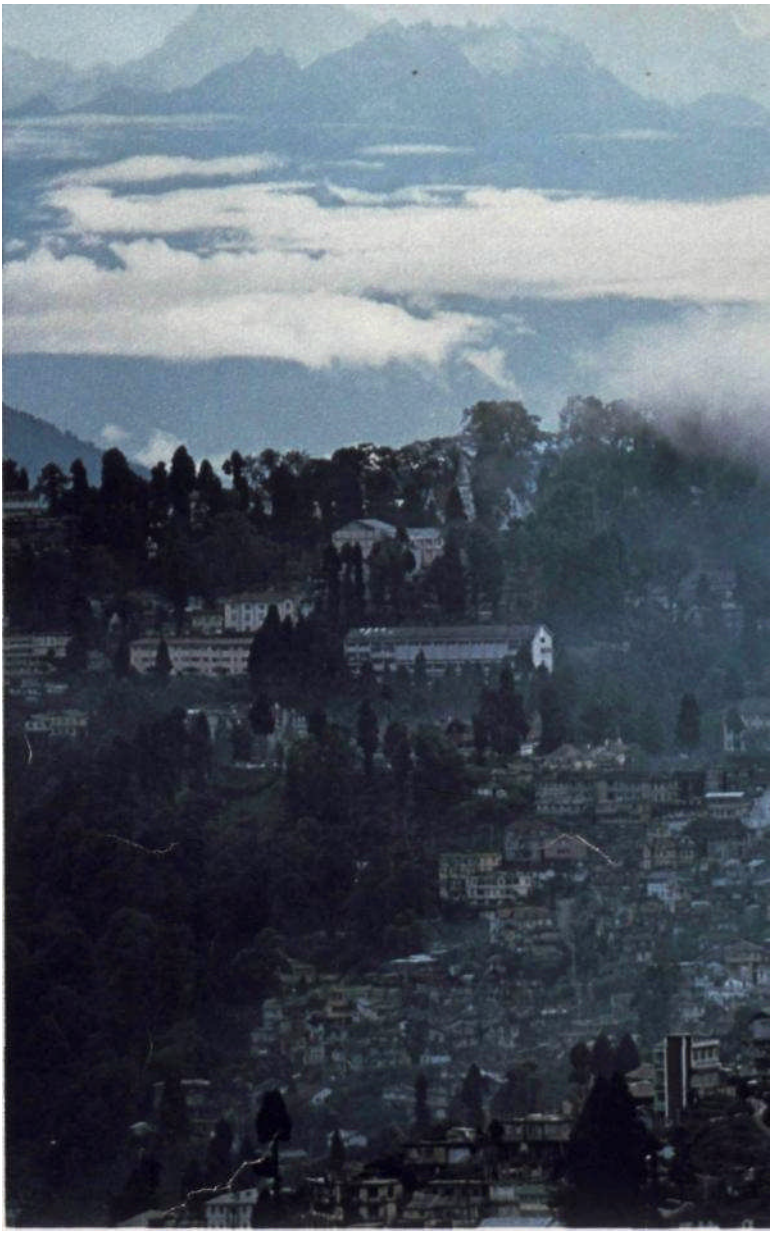
Portrait of the depot as village. *Howrah station serves Calcutta and embraces a community. The sleepy sprawl anywhere, beggars beg, mothers suckle infants.*

National Geographic, June 1984

Some vendors live here permanently. Enthusiastic travelers may arrive three days early and camp out. Howrah, India's largest passenger terminal, has seen all.
By Rail Across the Indian Subcontinent

"So wild and interesting *and exciting and enchanting that it ought to take a week/' declared Mark Twain in 1896 of his eight-hour trip on a narrow-gauge train from Siliguri to the cool heights of Darjeeling. Beyond the mist said to be a boon for one of the town's attractions—plantations of tea—looms another, Kanchenjunga, at 28,208 feet (8,598 meters) earth's third highest peak.*

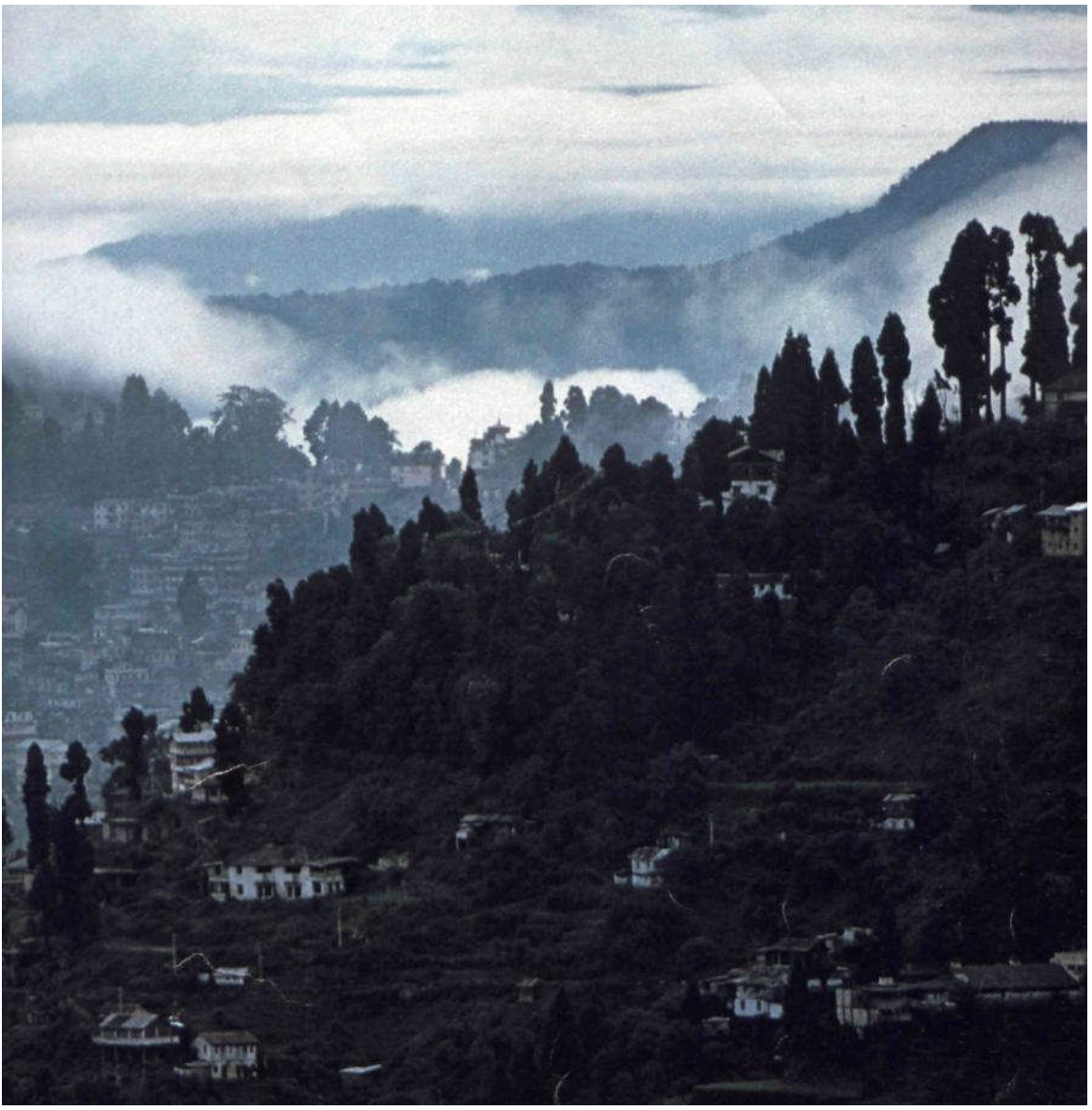
Begun as a sanatorium for the disease-riddled East India Company, Darjeeling was reached by rails in 1881. It still features innovations such as the "Batasia Loop," born of a lofty and ticklish terrain. High above the town, the train executes a steep spiraling descent—as *Twain put it, "Like a snake swallowing itself."*



At Tongi junction I saw another train pull in. There were perhaps 50 people clinging to the sides of the engine and hanging from the carriages and sitting and standing on the coach roofs. These seemingly magnetized people had the effect of making the train look small. They completely covered it, and of course the paying passengers were jammed inside.

I leaned out the window and saw that, apart from my coach, my whole train was exactly the same—people everywhere, holding on to the sides, the engine, and crowding the roofs. To the sound of a young beggar boy's flute, the train rattled south.

In this hot, stricken country the only things that moved were the trains. But there was no panic. At Akhaura ("Change here for Sylhet") a man stood up to his waist in a flooded field thoughtfully washing his cow, and farther on boats had penetrated to villages—the larger boats were beamy, like old Portuguese frigates, and the



smaller ones were gracefully shaped, much like Persian slippers.

"You will see where President Zia was assassinated in Chittagong," Mr. Shahid said as we rolled along, as if he were passing on a piece of tourist information.

At Comilla I met a young man who had just opened an office to encourage Bangladeshis to enroll in a voluntary sterilization program. "They need incentives. . . ." What sort? I wondered. "We have tried money and clothes as a sort of reward, but it is not enough. We need something more substantial. There is no problem with middle-class people. I have two children myself, and I think that is a good number. The problem is with the poor. But this is a democratic country, and so we do not make sterilization compulsory."

Was he making any progress?

"Very slow progress," he said. *(Continued on page 742)*

Darjeelina's "toy train," *loved by children of all ages (facing page), chugs up a grade on track set only two feet apart, narrowest in India. Attendants riding the engine sprinkle sand on wet rails for better traction. Carrying more than tourists, cars echo with Bengali, Hindi, Tibetan, and Nepali. This ethnic diversity is attested by Nepalese schoolgirls* ***(right),*** *whose male comrades hitch rides on the train. Tracks lead to market for youths who haul firewood they cut nearby (above).*

Too much of a good thing, *monsoon floods drive Bangladeshis to the only high ground. Once part of India's network, the railway was partitioned in 1947 along*

National Geographic, June 1984

with East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Passenger service has been suspended for nearly 20 years by strained relations and sporadic border violence.

By Rail Across the Indian Subcontinent

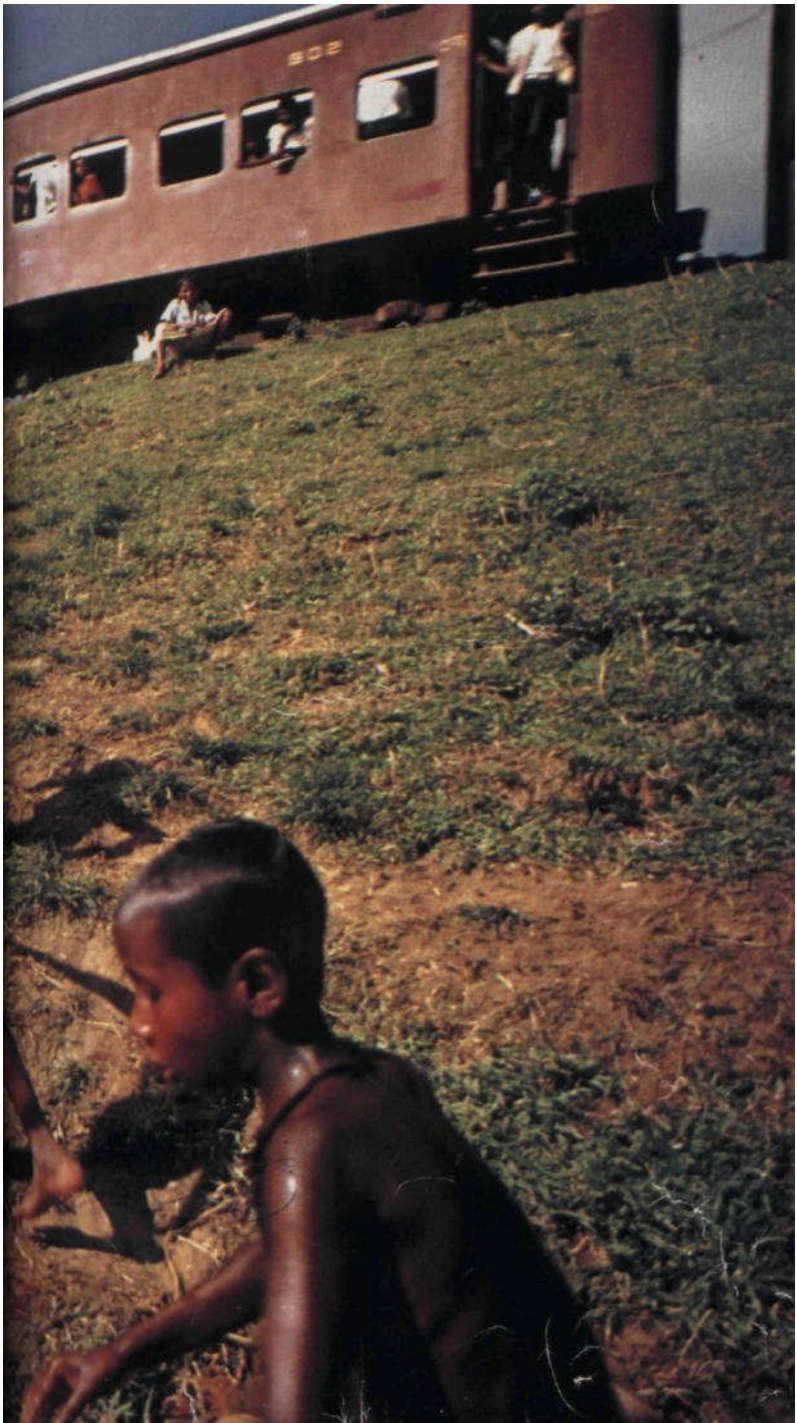
THE WORST of the floods were south of Comilla, at the town of Feni. With a kind of gloomy resignation some people resolutely bailed out their houses and fields, and others took baths. The children in the area were swimming and diving and having a wonderful time. The floods had also brought fish to these hungry people, and where the banks of rivers had been breached, fishermen were enthusiastically using nets, scoops, lines, buckets, and ancient-looking fish traps.

The day continued hot, but the flood did not abate. Just ahead lay Chittagong, simmering under the sun, an unprepossessing

settlement on the estuary of the Karnaphuli River—docks, moldy buildings, prowling seamen, blackened palm trees, storm-damaged roads. The airport had been closed for three days. It too was underwater.

Even the people in Chittagong admit there is very little to see there. They say, "Go to Rangamati" (known for colorful tribesmen), "See Karnaphuli Reservoir" (a big lake), or "Go to Cox's Bazar" (a seedy resort farther down the Bay of Bengal).

I did not make any more plans. For me this was the end of the line.



Skinny-dippers' boon, *railroaders' headache, monsoon waters recede from one of the bridges along the Chittagong-Dhaka line that now must be checked foi flood damage—and the nation has 3,633 rail bridges. Consisting essentially of one large delta fed by a pair of rivers, Bangladesh is not an easy place in which to run a railroad. But the country's 1,792 miles (2,884 kilometers) of track carry nearly a third of its freight. Its biggest worry today is how to fill the outbound cars since its principal export, jute, is now in low demand worldwide. Meanwhile, this line has been scrubbed up and completely rehabilitated with a loan from the Asian Development Bank.*

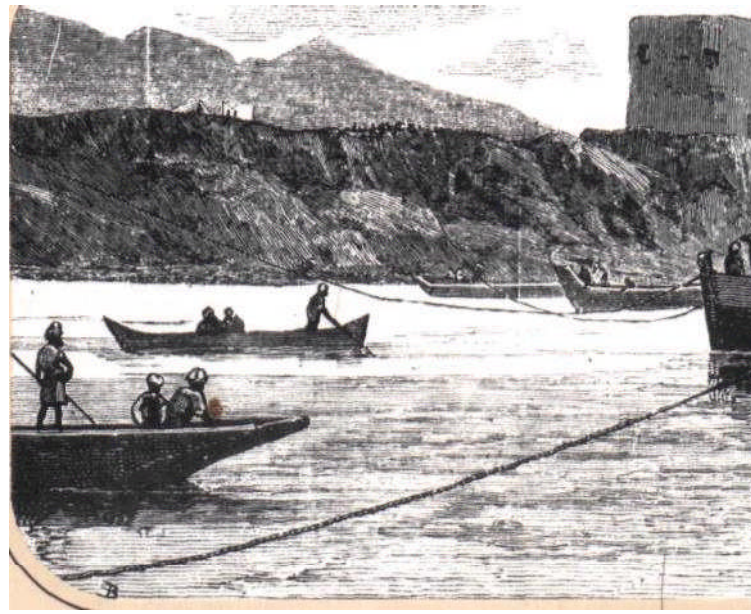
38,000 MILES OF TRACK

By SATOW

WTHEN, in 1852, Frederick Sleigh Roberts, afterward Field Marshal Lord Roberts, V.C., arrived at Dum-Dum as a young subaltern, no railway yet existed in India. Posted to a regiment at Peshawar, 1,300 miles away on the North-West Frontier, Lieutenant Roberts proceeded up the Ganges to Banaras (now Varanasi) in a barge towed by a steamer, then traveled overland to Meerut by horse *dak* (mail coach). For the final 600 miles he was carried overland in a dooly, or litter, by eight-man relays divided into teams of four bearers; to escape the heat, they traveled at night, led by a torchbearer. In his memoirs Roberts describes the dooly ride as the most tedious portion of the trip.

This trip across the breadth of India took nearly three months. When Roberts departed the country 46 years later, he noted that the same distance could be traversed by train in three days "with the greatest ease and comfort." Few British, at least, still traveled at the dreamy pace of the India Roberts knew as a young man.

Today Indian Railways carries nearly four billion passengers yearly (compared to 300 million in the United States) and 270 million tons of freight on a 38,000-mile network of track. Passengers can travel in air-conditioned comfort (first or second class) or opt not to have air conditioning and know the land, its sounds and smells, and its people in their unchanging fascination.



On to the Khyber Pass: *Expanding India's railway to Peshawar in 1881, the first engine is ferried across the*

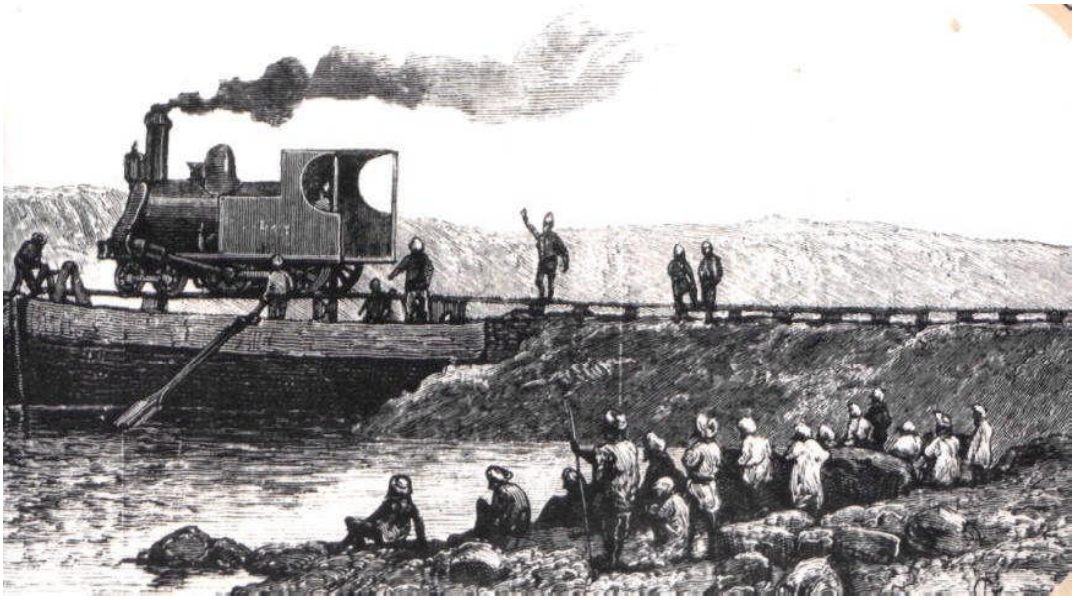
India, when Roberts arrived there, was governed by the East India Company, whose first charter to trade in the East Indies was granted in the year 1600 by Queen Elizabeth I. Travel was not merely slow; it was often impossible. The monsoon turned the roads to mud and the rivers to flood; dry weather transformed roads into dust bowls and reduced rivers to a trickle. Pilferage was epidemic and delays and damage to goods commonplace. Deployment of troops to areas of unrest was hampered by terrain and climate.

The first proposals for railways in India were submitted in 1843, but much argument and delay ensued before the first schemes came to fruition some ten years later. Many doubted the economic viability of the development plans; others questioned their practicality because of India's difficult terrain, fickle climate, and uneducated populace. The long line of communication between India and Britain slowed proceedings almost to a halt.

Matters dragged on until 1847, when Lord Dalhousie, who had had experience in railway development in England, was appointed governor general of India. He soon brought his

Railway historian **Michael G. Satow,** who lived and worked in India for IS years, is coauthor of *Railways of the Raj.* He currently resides in England.

Railway Lifeline



UUSTRATED LONDON NEWS PICTURE LIBRARY

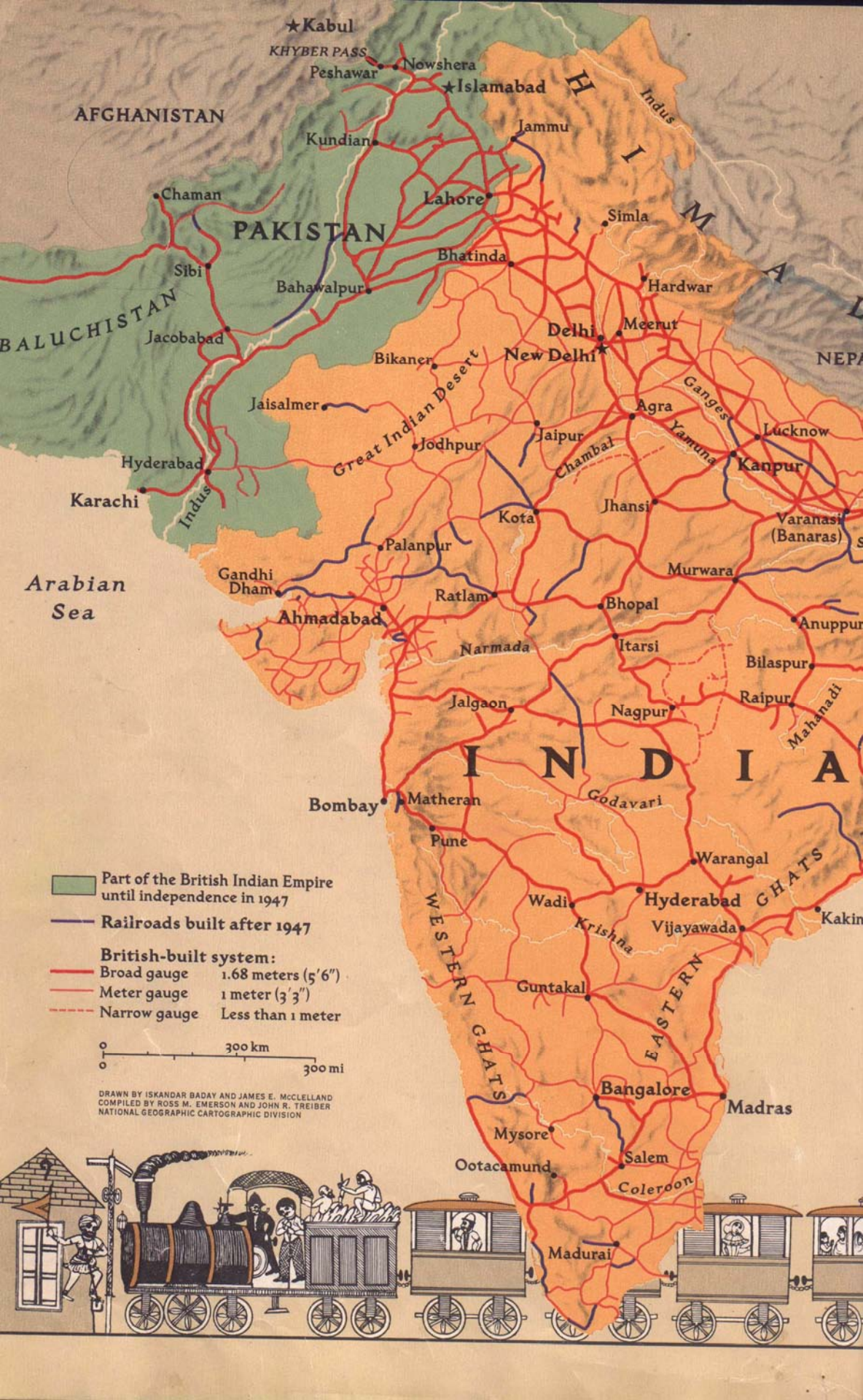
Indus River on boats bearing timbers with track already attached. Bankside ruin remains from a futile effort by Britain's indefatigable engineers to tunnel under the river.

incisive mind and decisive character to bear, and in 1849 agreements were prepared for trial lines to run inland from Bombay (Great Indian Peninsula Railway), Calcutta (East Indian Railway), and Madras (Madras Railway).

The railway promoters from Britain had driven a hard bargain: Rights-of-way and other necessary land were provided free of charge by the government of India, with a guarantee of 5 percent minimum return on capital invested. For its part, the government had considerable powers to dictate the line of the railway and the siting of even minor stations. It also shared the profits in excess of S percent and had a right to purchase the railway from the rail companies after 25 years, usually leaving the company to manage affairs on an agency basis. Lord Dalhousie decreed that only one rail gauge would be used in the land, and settled it at five feet six inches. The first train left Bombay on April 16, 1853, to be followed just over a year later by the East Indian Railway and in 1856 by the Madras Railway.

MILITARY leaders encouraged concentration on a line from Calcutta to Delhi and on to Lahore. By 1857 this line was being built but was incomplete, and it was in that year that the Indian Mutiny (or War of Independence if you were on the opposite side) erupted in Meerut. Astrologers had predicted that the demise of the raj of the East India Company would occur 100 years after the Battle of Plassey; 99 years had passed when the sepoys of the Indian regiments rose up against their officers and briefly seized control of much of northern India.

Whether the completion of the line would have prevented the rising, which was marked by great heroism and slaughter on both sides, is open to doubt; at best it might have shortened the agony and reduced the bloodshed. As it was, the mutiny added a further obstacle to those provided by nature and delayed the progress on the northern lines by some six months. Elsewhere in the country, work continued apace.


Kabul
KHYBER PASS
Peshawar
Nowshera
Islamabad
AFGHANISTAN
Kundian
Jammu
Indus
HIMALA
Chaman
Lahore
Simla
PAKISTAN
Sibi
Bhatinda
Hardwar
Bahawalpur
BALUCHISTAN
Jacobabad
Delhi
Meerut
New Delhi
Bikaner
Great Indian Desert
Ganges
Jaisalmer
Agra
Yamuna
Lucknow
Jodhpur
Jaipur
Chambal
Kanpur
Hyderabad
Karachi
Indus
Kota
Jhansi
Varanasi (Banaras)
Palanpur
Murwara
Arabian Sea
Gandhi Dham
Ratlam
Bhopal
Ahmadabad
Anuppur
Narmada
Itarsi
Bilaspur
Jalgaon
Nagpur
Raipur
Mahanadi
INDIA
Bombay
Matheran
Godavari
Pune
Warangal
Part of the British Indian Empire until independence in 1947
Railroads built after 1947
British-built system:
Broad gauge 1.68 meters (5′6″)
Meter gauge 1 meter (3′3″)
Narrow gauge Less than 1 meter
0 300 km
0 300 mi
DRAWN BY ISKANDAR BADAY AND JAMES E. McCLELLAND
COMPILED BY ROSS M. EMERSON AND JOHN R. TREIBER
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION
Wadi
Hyderabad
GHATS
Vijayawada
Krishna
WESTERN GHATS
EASTERN
Guntakal
Bangalore
Madras
Mysore
Salem
Ootacamund
Coleroon
Madurai

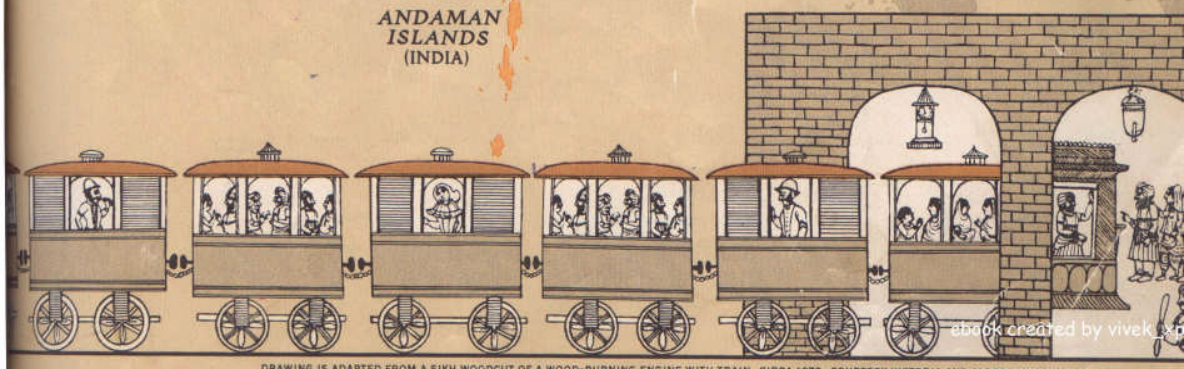
Legacy of empire: India's rail system

SEWING A SUBCONTINENT together, the imperial raj created a herculean system. A daily average of ten million passengers and 740,000 tons of freight are pulled by 11,000 locomotives over 38,000 miles (61,000 kilometers) of track linking 7,072 stations, all maintained by 1.6 million workers, making Indian Railways the nation's largest employer.

The first train steamed off in 1853 on one of three lines begun to connect Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. But surveyors had learned their railroading on much kinder British topography, whereas here they confronted a merciless landscape. Rivers that ran seasonally from trickle to torrent required immense bridges with foundations as deep as 140 feet (43 meters). Sheer outcrops demanded formidable grades, switchbacks, and more powerful engines.

Because two gauges of track had competed in England, a single broad gauge of five feet six inches was decreed for India. But in 1870, to save money, a one-meter gauge was added. Narrow gauges of two feet and two feet six inches followed. To compound the confusion, even after India went metric in 1956, it continued to convert its one-meter-gauge track to broad gauge.

CHINA
TIBET
A Y A S
Mt. Everest 8,848 m (29,028 ft)
Kanchenjunga 8,598 m (28,208 ft)
Thimphu
BHUTAN
Kathmandu
Darjeeling
Murkong Selek
Saikhoa Ghat
Nowgong
Darbhanga
Ganges
Brahmaputra
Sylhet
Silchar
BANGLADESH
Gaya
Asansol
Dhaka (Dacca)
BURMA
Jamshedpur
Dum-Dum
Calcutta
Rangamati
Chittagong
Kharagpur
Mouths of the Ganges
Cox's Bazar
Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, gained its independence in 1971.
Cuttack
Bay of Bengal
ANDAMAN ISLANDS (INDIA)



DRAWING IS ADAPTED FROM A SIKH WOODCUT OF A WOOD-BURNING ENGINE WITH TRAIN, CIRCA 1870. COURTESY VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

ebook created by vivek

By 1869 some 4,000 miles of railway, all five-foot-six-inch gauge, had been completed at a cost of as much as' £20,000 ($93,000) a mile. At this point the government, by now the imperial raj that had been established following the demise of the East India Company, began to buy railway companies and invest directly in railways. These became known as Indian State Railways.

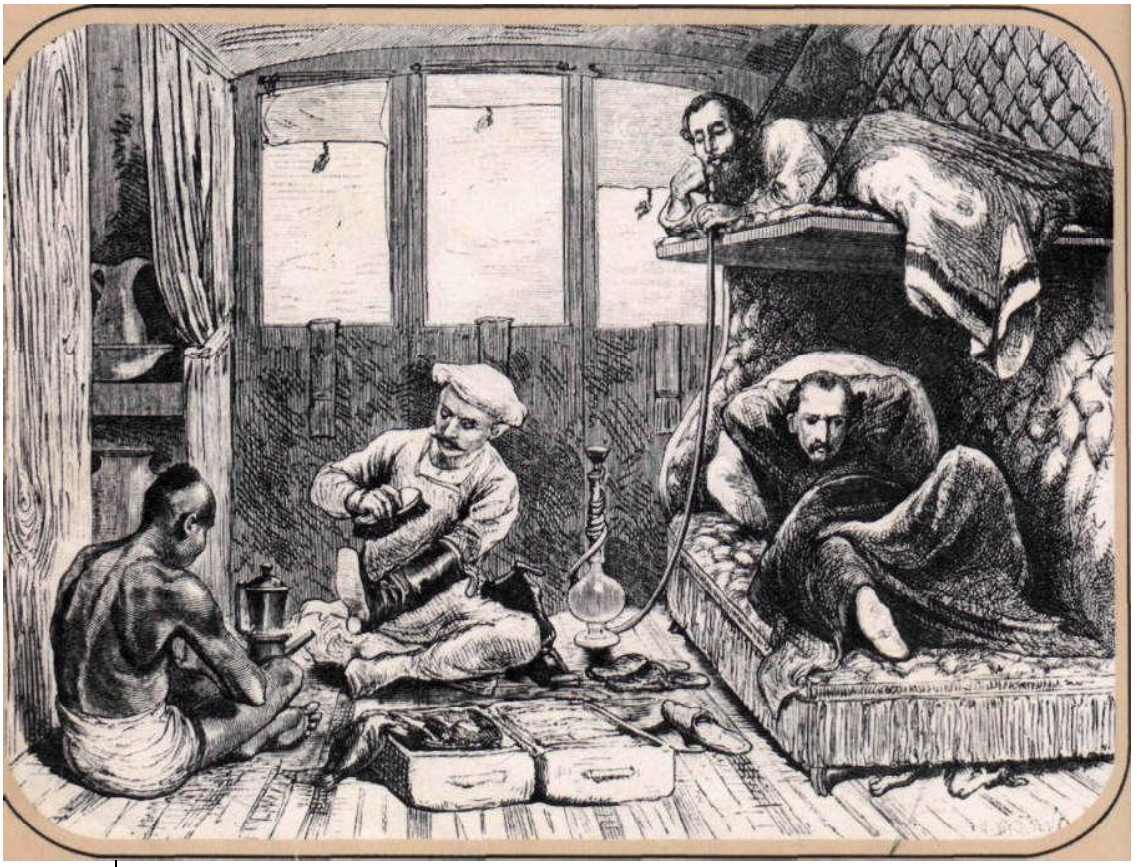
Short of funds, the government sought to reduce building costs. The result, approved by Lord Lawrence, then viceroy of India, was to overturn Dalhousie's "one gauge" dictum and adopt the narrower gauge of three feet six inches.

In 1870 Lord Mayo became viceroy and, as a first step in the introduction of the metric system to India, changed the gauge to one meter (3 feet $3^3/_3$ inches). The cost of installing meter gauge is roughly half that of broad gauge. Rapid development of two separate meter-gauge systems followed, spurred on by the pressing need for famine-relief lines in the areas north of the Ganges and northwest from Madras.

The maharaja of Mysore, one of many Indian princes who built private railways within their states, solved the problem of travel over differing gauges by having his luxurious saloon car jacked up, complete with occupants, while the wheels and axles were changed.

Today, meter-gauge tracks run the length of India, but it remains impractical to transfer rolling stock from the tracks of one gauge to another. Perhaps confirming Dalhousie's original wisdom, many meter-gauge lines are now being converted to more practical broad gauge.

The period 1870 to 1900 was one of intensive building on both the broad and meter gauges. This period also saw



BRITISH LIBRARY

With *creature comforts,* *including Rover under the bed, Europeans traveled first class in the 1880s. A century later India exports its own railway expertise and equipment to many Third World nations. The high-speed* Rajdhani Expresses *now near a milestone by Indian standards: 100 miles an hour.*

construction of the fascinating narrow-gauge scenic hill railways from the plains to hill resorts at Darjeeling, Simla, Matheran, and Ootacamund. The Darjeeling and Matheran lines were built on a gauge of two feet, while Simla used the two-foot-six-inch width. The Ootacamund line was meter gauge and employed a cog system for the steepest grades.

Small though these railways were in scale, they represented major engineering feats. The Darjeeling Railway climbs 54 miles to an altitude of 7,407 feet and must circle upon itself and reverse up zigzags in some places to gain height; the Simla line passes through 103 tunnels in 60 miles to reach nearly the same altitude; the Matheran Railway rises 2,363 feet in 12 miles with 281 curves. In addition, several states and companies developed networks of narrow-gauge railways (mostly two feet six inches) to act as feeders to the main lines.

India entered the 20th century with an extensive and interconnected network of railway lines and an assortment of locomotives and rolling stock operated by dozens of companies. In 1903 the first series of standard locomotives was designed to reduce the problem of spares and operation when locomotives traveled beyond the end of their own company's lines on tracks of the same gauge.

This standardization was not always popular with railway engineers, who had a not unreasonable mistrust of consultants closeted in a London office, but it was important in large-scale military movements over long distances and when equipment had to be borrowed from other lines. The British mold was broken with the introduction of a large number of locomotives imported from the United States during World War II.

Electric and diesel engines are rapidly displacing steam on the main lines, although steam locomotives are still to be found trundling along the meter- and narrow-gauge branch lines. India now builds all its own railway equipment and exports some to other countries.

Electrification was introduced in the 1920s. The heavily traveled suburban lines serving Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta were converted along with the heavily graded main lines out of Bombay and up the Western Ghats. Today the main trunk routes and certain heavily trafficked mining lines are being electrified at 25,000 volts.

THE LAST foreign railwaymen departed India some 30 years ago, leaving behind a tradition that has been maintained with pride and competence. Some measure of the pride may be gained from the establishment, in New Delhi, of a fine and comprehensive Museum of Indian Railways.

The railways of India were built by men and women who toiled stubbornly against appalling odds with primitive equipment and in the most taxing climate. Specialist teams, such as Cornish miners who were short of work in their own country, would often be brought out to undertake such tasks as rock tunneling, while Indians with special skills, such as masons from Rajasthan, followed the railway builders around the land.

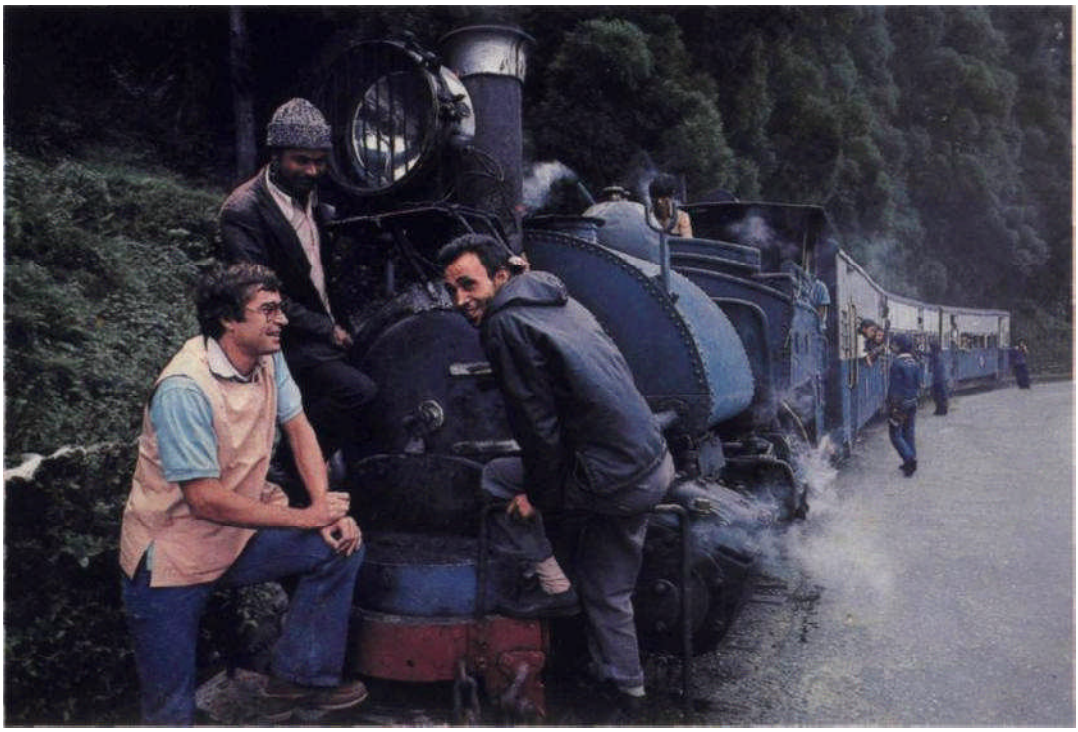
In the 19th century, mass labor was the order of the day, with construction gangs of as many as 40,000 souls, sometimes in camps of 10,000 and more. Disease was frequently epidemic. When cholera struck a camp of 10,000 laborers in Baluchistan in May 1885, 2,000 died. They were among 15,000 builders of a line running from Sibi to Chaman on the Afghan frontier through the confused, fissured mountain mass in western Pakistan.

Landslides, mountain torrents, attacks by tribesmen, and the complications of building a roadbed and driving tunnels through a rock face 200 feet above a tumultuous river required heroic efforts. In the six years after its completion in 1887, the line was breached 15 times by landslides and washouts and was finally abandoned in 1942 after part of a cliff face collapsed under the rails.

In the lowlands a British contractor named Solomon Tredwell was engaged to build the challenging line up the Western Ghats between Bombay and Pune. Within two weeks of landing in Bombay, he contracted fever and died. His young widow took over and completed the contract.

Technical skills may at first have come from Britain, but many fine Indian engineers emerged. Much of the work was grand in concept and inspiring in execution. The architects' imagination had free rein; nothing could be more imposing, than the Gothic-Saracenic Victoria Terminus in Bombay, or more forbidding than the station at Lahore, fortified with crenellated towers at the corners and massive iron doors at each end to close the openings against attack by insurgents or the hill tribes of the North-West Frontier. Happily, most of this work stands to this day as a memorial to the pioneers of India's railways.

On Assignment



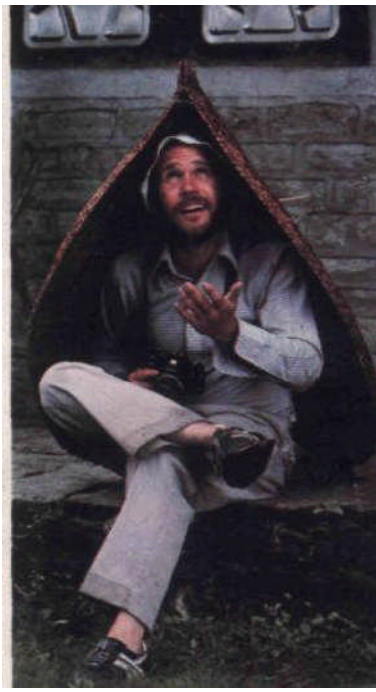
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE MCCURRY (ABOVE) AND LAUREN STOCKBOWER

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD still can, best-selling author ***Paul Theroux*** finds as he interviews employees of the "toy train" that climbs Himalayan foothills to Darjeeling on a century-old narrow-gauge railway ***(above).*** "Every passenger was either a Buddhist monk, a schoolchild, or a little old lady with a chicken going to market," he recalls. In Darjeeling's heady ethnic maelstrom he found Tibetan artifacts carved from yak vertebrae—"but I drew the line at buying others made from a human tibia."

Riding the rails from Pakistan's Khyber Pass across India to Bangladesh was vintage Theroux. Massachusetts-born, he joined the Peace Corps to teach in Africa. His 20 books include *The Great Railway Bazaar,* which chronicles a pan-Asian train trip; *The Mosquito Coast*, set in Honduras; and *The Kingdom by the Sea*, about Great Britain, where he now makes his home.

Keeping his camera dry and his hands free in a downpour, ***Steve McCurry*** dons a shield of straw popular in parts of India and Nepal ***(right).*** A Pennsylvania native, Steve's free-lance images often reflect a passion for the Middle East and Asia. His work in Afghanistan won the Overseas Press Club's gold medal in 1980.

Aboard Indian trains, suffocating crowds sometimes forced him to join riders on car tops. "Once I was photographing and didn't see some low electrical lines," he says. "One hit me in the back of the head and knocked me down, but fortunately not off the car."



Ebook released by Vivek.BN