

Transport users, and historie(s) of transport: 'A view from below'

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Abstract

This article proposes a methodological departure. It makes a case for foregrounding interactions between users and transport systems as a methodological departure to move beyond institutional perspectives in history of transport. This wider point is examined in this article through the illustrative example of how at an everyday level users negotiate/contest exclusionary practices and transport disadvantage. The article acknowledges the challenges of this methodological shift, especially the difficulties of recovering 'everyday' experiences of transport users. It also recognises that users' mediation and responses sit at the interstices of operational policies of transport infrastructure, individual/collective agency, and the workings of capital. Notwithstanding these caveats, the article suggests that innovative and explicit foregrounding of transport users has the potential to disaggregate the institutional perspective in writing histories of transport.

Keywords

Transport history, history from below, transport disadvantage, workings of capital

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Taking ‘turns’: transport history and paradigm shifts

Transport history is currently enjoying an exciting moment of growth. In the last four decades or so, the temporal, thematic, and spatial scope of research in history of transport has substantially expanded. The older image of transport history as a narrow field primarily examining development of railways or inland waterways is no longer valid. Since the late 1990s, new conceptual paradigms have shaped the research parameters of history of transport. Of these, arguably the most important influence in recent decades have been the ‘cultural turn’.¹ Broadly speaking, the ‘cultural turn’, like its progenitor the ‘linguistic turn’ privileged representation and identities over positivist epistemology and historical objectivity, and in so doing challenged long-standing practices of historical methodologies (or doing History).² In the context of transport history, this implied a reconceptualization of systems of transport as ‘embedded’ in societies and cultures. Viewed through the lens of the ‘cultural turn’, transport was no longer perceived merely as infrastructure, but the expressions of power relations and identities in any given society. This ‘discursive’ approach to history of transport was certainly a revision of long-standing theoretical concerns that had defined the field, most notably, the overlap between social and economic history with a nod to production and operation of networks of transport.³

The influence of the ‘cultural turn’ however, soon went beyond borrowing of conceptual paradigms. In an article published in 2005, Colin Divall and George Revill argued for a whole-hearted incorporation of ‘cultural turn’ in transport history, while proposing culture to be accorded a central spot in the ‘engagement between transport historiography and other disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences’.⁴ However, the value of Colin Divall and George Revill’s call for overhaul of transport history with culture and ‘richness of social meaning’ at its centre was disputed by other historians of transport, most notably Michael Freeman. At one level, he argued that Colin Divall and George Revill’s claims that to be at the ‘cutting edge of historiographical research’, transport history ought to borrow the conceptual categories from the ‘cultural turn’ was misplaced, since at least 1970s, the scholars of transport history have had integrated social and cultural dimensions to their analysis.⁵ At another, perhaps more crucial context, Michael Freeman reminded that a turn to culture in transport history must not ignore workings of capital, and the focus of research must be on the dialectics between the ‘structural and contingent’.⁶ In hindsight, this was perhaps the most crucial caveat from Michael Freeman as increasingly ‘culture’, ‘discourse’, and representation – loan words and

¹ There is wide literature on cultural turn, for an accessible and broad overview see Jameson Fredric, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 2009).

² For an engaging account of impact of the linguistic turn on social history in Britain see, James Vernon, “Who’s afraid of the linguistic turn? The politics of social history and its discontents”, *Social History*, 19:1 (1994), 81–97.

³ Colin Divall, “Mobilities and Transport History”, in Peter Adey et al. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2014), 36–44.

⁴ Colin Divall and George, Revill, “Cultures of Transport: Representation, Practice and Technology”, *The Journal of Transport History*, 26:1 (2005), 99–111.

⁵ Michael Freeman, “‘Turn if you want to’: A comment of the ‘cultural turn’ in Divall and Revill’s ‘Cultures of Transport’”, *The Journal of Transport History*, 27:1 (2006), 138–43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

concepts from the ‘cultural turn’ shifted the focus of transport history away from materiality towards symbols/symbolism.

This, however, is not to dismiss the ‘cultural turns’ contribution to transport history. There is little doubt that the ‘cultural turn’ enabled transport history to analyse more explicitly *how* transport systems interacted or operated within wider socio-cultural contexts. This intertwining, in most analyses also allowed a more tangible interrogation of notions of power, identities and social relations underpinning construction, designing and operation of transport system. More specifically, ‘cultural turn’ was certainly an analytical driving force to investigate diverse ways in which specific social groups related to systems of transport and how such relationships were defined by access to or lack of power. In short, to a large extent, the ‘cultural turn’ induced a notional shift in which transport systems’ theoretical universality as means of transit available to everyone was thoroughly challenged and replaced with a conceptual paradigm in which transport disadvantage and social exclusions emerged as significant research themes. This centring of transport as socio-culturally embedded systems of infrastructure is perhaps the most enduring impact of the ‘cultural turn’ – an influence that also facilitated transport history’s dynamic interactions with the ‘mobility turn’.

First developed by John Urry and others, the ‘mobility turn’ was originally conceptualised to rethink and challenge ‘fixity and stasis’ bias in social sciences research.⁷ Intended as ‘post-disciplinary’, the new paradigm of the ‘mobility turn’ also aimed to undermine the separate ‘black boxes’ in which social science research resided.⁸ This intended trans-disciplinarity and the focus on mobility was particularly appealing to historians of transport for it allowed to highlight the centrality of means of transit in mediating mobilities. Additionally, the emphasis on ‘mobile subject’ as the central figure of analysis in the ‘mobility turn’ offered historians of transport a new conceptual framework to examine modalities of systems of transport, while focusing on issues such as *who is mobile*; and *how* access to transport and greater/lesser degrees of mobilities are co-constitutive of social power relations and identities. This emphasis on intertwining of power and identities was influenced as much by transport history’s encounter with the ‘cultural turn’, as it was by the preponderance of the ‘mobility turn’s’ interest in the ‘mobile subject’, including but not limited to intersections between spatial and social mobilities.⁹ In other words, the ‘mobility turn’ reinforced history of transport’s continued move (to use a suitable mobile metaphor) towards focusing more on subjective experiences of mobilities largely through the lens of distinct identities (e.g. gender, ethnicity etc.) while paying relatively less attention to institutional aspects of management and operation of transport. By early 2000s, it was evident that the ongoing interest in ‘unequal power relations embedded within mobilities’,¹⁰ was instrumental in widening the ambit of research themes pursued by historians of transport. Previously overlooked

⁷ For an earliest account of the mobility turn see its proponent John Urry’s title, John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007 first edition). Also, “Introduction”, in Peter Adey et al. (eds), “The Routledge handbook”.

⁸ John Urry, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G22hDmpfELk> accessed 5 April 2022

⁹ Vincent, Kaufmann et al., “Motility: Mobility as Capital”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28:4 (2004), 745–56.

¹⁰ Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in Age of Extremes* (New York NY: Verso, 2018).

themes such as mobilities engendered through travel, tourism, or migration provided new avenues of research, while automobiles, aeroplanes, bicycles, and walking were added to existing staples of transport history to highlight ways in which means of transit produced divergent, or contested mobilities. In short, transport history as it is now written, or conceptualised has certainly moved beyond its older research confines – a shift underpinned by an awareness that role of means of transit ‘go beyond the functional movement of goods and people’,¹¹ in an increasingly mobile world.

At a different pace: exclusionary practices,¹² and transport history

Transport history’s productive collaboration with the ‘mobility turn’ have revealed that mobility as a lived reality is profoundly circumscribed by socio-economic contexts. It is also equally well-acknowledged that mobility without constraint, a reified product of neo-capitalist economic principles and policies, is at once desirable or aspirational (e.g. for the global elite or Capital); and detested (e.g. ex-UK prime minister Theresa May’s famous term ‘citizens of nowhere’ or nativist political movements extolling ‘rootedness’ in different parts of the world). As a corollary, we now know that two very divergent groups of individuals, inhabiting two ends of the economic spectrum can be equally mobile: viz., global elite, and the global poor – both serving, in their own ways, the needs of capital. Similarly, we also know how certain kinds of mobilities (investors, international students) are more incentivised over other not-so-welcome mobilities (low-income/unskilled immigrants, itinerants, vagabonds, asylum seekers or refugees). Scholars of transport history now have a significant degree of insight about how transport infrastructures and its operational policies deter equitable access to means of transit.¹³

Indeed, over the last decade, one of the most enduring research themes in transport history has been the lack of equitable access to transport (and by implications mobility) and its deleterious impact on individuals, communities, and societies. These contributions are valuable and insightful. However, it is also evident that the focus of research in transport history remains largely institutional. Indeed, it can be argued that what Colin Divall noted in 2014 retains a great degree of truth, viz., ‘transport history continues to ignore users’.¹⁴

As such, a case can certainly be made of a larger presence and visibility of users in writing histories of transport.¹⁵ Analysing users in relation to technology is hardly a

¹¹ Colin Divall, “Mobilities and Transport History”, 37.

¹² Here exclusionary practices imply any measures or policies denying equitable access to means of transit and mobility. It includes what can be termed as explicit and implicit exclusionary practices. The former includes institutional measure, e.g., formalised immigration policies, while the latter entails the informal, ‘customary’ etc., e.g., denying equal access to public transport to people of lower caste in contemporary south Asia. This division can be artificial and overlap between explicit and implicit may occur.

¹³ There is wide literature on the subject, for an overview see, Karen Lucas, “Transport and Social Exclusion: Where are we now?”, *Transport Policy*, 20 (2012), 105–13.

¹⁴ Colin Divall, “Mobilities and Transport History”, 37.

¹⁵ The article is not claiming that analysing transport users’ experiences is entirely novel. However, as the reviewer themselves admitted, there is certainly scope for anchoring transport history in a methodological approach foregrounding users.

novelty.¹⁶ But histories of transport have largely circumvented attempts to appraise co-constitution of technologies of transit through users. Thinking more closely about who(s) and, how(s) of users, while drawing upon theoretical interventions by sociologists of technologies, scholars of gender studies, and culture and media studies can provide dynamic theoretical templates for historians of transport. More specifically, differentiating, diversifying, and disaggregating the notion of users in relation to transit will allow continued and robust interrogation of links between transport, mobilities and marginalisation.

This proposal for directing research towards users is not a call for abandoning histories of institutions and policies. Quite to the contrary, users mediate transport infrastructures via institutions and policies. Therefore, methodologically speaking, privileging users does not preclude institutional. If anything, it allows a greater interrogation of the institutional policies and practices through the lens of users and the various ways in which they mediate or negotiate with systems of transport.

Take for instance the following example. It is indicative of how a user-centric approach allows a more inclusive appraisal of transport systems, especially the points of intersections between the individual and the institutional. A survey of a cross-section low-income daily commuters who travel Kolkata (to work as housemaids) revealed that these users negotiated policies designed to impede their access to high-speed trains mainly by bribing the ticket collectors and trains guards to schedule a halt (where there was none), and use it to board faster trains, often in large groups.¹⁷ This is a certainly an instance of transport disadvantage and mobility poverty – two abiding research interests for historians of transport. However, the survey focused on both the institutional aspects (viz., railway policies), and how the users negotiate/mediate the former. Foregrounding users' responses did not diminish the significance of the former. Instead, it enhances our understanding of how transport systems are animated through users, and more crucially perhaps, offers analytical entry-points to reappraise the limits of the institutional, albeit in varying degrees.

At an evident level, pivoting towards dynamic interactions between users and transport infrastructures have the advantage of recognising agency – of either individuals or a collective.¹⁸ At the same time however, cautions and caveats must be applied while interpreting agency if only because it can be difficult to discern if all 'weapons of the weak' were/are indeed resistance or subversion, or mere actions suitable for the moment, and thus bereft of any political or other 'hidden transcripts'.¹⁹ The move away from institutional provides the

¹⁶ Nellon Oudshoorn and Trevon Pinch (eds), *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁷ The author conducted this survey in Spring 2020. The research (both archival and interviewing train users) was interrupted by the outbreak of the Covid pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. Though incomplete, the preliminary interviews highlight the potential for a user-centric approach. For a useful analysis of female domestic workers see, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Here agency (noun) implies the ability to act or to choose what action to take.

¹⁹ The allusion is to James C. Scott's terms: James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press; Revised edition, 1987); see also, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1990). For a useful discussion of criticism of Scott see, Kenneth W. Goings and Gerland L. Smith, "Unhidden Transcripts: Memphis and African American Agency, 1862–1920", *Journal of Urban History*, 21:3 (1995), 372–94.

opportunity to bring individual users of transport within the ambit of analysis. Though methodologically challenging, more of which in the concluding section, here it will be worthwhile to note that individual adds specificity, and as such, can provide glimpses of motives and actions that may otherwise be lost.²⁰ Equally importantly, as alluded above, transport users' negotiations emphasise limits of institutional policies and measures. This, however, is not to suggest that institutional aspects are either ineffectual, or insignificant. Instead, as the instance of low-income daily commuters in India indicate, users' abilities to negotiate, subvert, or circumvent offers occasions to interrogate the remits the institutional. In short, a user-centric methodology has the potential to inform nuanced realities of institutional practices, particularly the convergences and divergences of policies and their implementation or enforcement – thus underlining how transport systems are mediated at an everyday level.²¹

Equally significantly, interrogating the points or the sites at which policies and its implementations collide or intersect from the vantage of the users who challenge, and contest these practices affords excellent opportunities to rethink (or in some contexts initiate thinking) the material underpinning of how inequities are created and sustained through transport infrastructures. We now know, courtesy the cultural turn that transport infrastructures are rooted in a discourse of identities and symbolises (among other things) uneven nature of power and social relations. Useful as this awareness is: it also deviates transport historians from what Michael Freeman termed as 'a whole field of determinations'.²² After all, uneven power – either social or ideological or both is an expression of the material and is compounded by it. It is not without significance that whether it is transport disadvantage or mobility poverty – it almost always corresponds with those who are materially deprived or in plain words poor. Therefore, methodologically speaking, a spotlight on users will have the vantage of illustrating how identities (the focal point of the 'cultural turn') are not fixed;²³ instead, it evolves in distinct relation to capital, and therefore, may acquire different meanings in changing contexts.

Take for instance the case of migration from Global South to Global North. It is well-known that the mobility and choice/freedom of movement of citizens/inhabitants of Global South are constrained by exclusionary practices (both explicit and implicit) that underpin immigration policies of Global North. Broadly speaking, these policies are now acknowledged as racialised measures designed to police mobilities of non-white groups or individuals. Admittedly, in this context, identity, especially racial identity plays a vital role in unpacking the nature of the exclusionary practices hindering equitable access to mobility and ease of transit. Racial identity also underscores how contemporary transport policies p affecting equitable access to means of transit and mobility are vestiges of

²⁰ Agency here is not conceptualised as merely individual. Instead, the suggestion is to underline how multiplicity of motivations shapes individual actions, and as such, has a significant bearing on interactions with transport (other) infrastructures. For an insightful analysis see, Chris Otter, "Locating Matter: the place of materiality in urban history", in Tony Bennett and Joyce Patrick (eds), *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London and New York NY: Routledge, 2010), 38–59, here 45–47.

²¹ Here every day (adverb) simply means each day, though it can also be interpreted as ordinary.

²² Freeman, "Turn if you", 141.

²³ Identity/ies are not immutable categories – historically it shifts but more crucially here, it transforms with changing relation to capital – both at an individual level and at a collective level.

older prejudices that informed colonial experiences and encounters. Yet, such insights notwithstanding, the viewing glass of identity – here, the racial one, is inadequately equipped to explain the seeming paradox of Global North prioritising and facilitating legal migration of the wealthy from Global South, while imposing harsh exclusionary practices to contain mobility of poor or unskilled (one pertinent examples will be seasonal agricultural workers or fishermen from non-EEA region in post-Brexit Britain) from the same region. Undoubtedly, this is not a novel observation.²⁴ But, combined with a call for repositioning methodological focus for transport history, it does suggest how users' perspective and experiences may show a path forward that acknowledges identity while contextualising its tactile relation to capital, and how the latter fractures both the notion and lived realities of identities.

Centring on users and their interactions with transport infrastructures can be a useful index to analyse how material inequities intersect with other forms of discriminations through the workings of transport infrastructure in vastly different spatial and temporal settings. An apposite example can be South Asia – a region with noticeable degree of mobility poverty, and transport disadvantage. There is no denying that South Asia's long history as the 'jewel' of the British Imperial crown has shaped the embeddedness of its transport infrastructure.²⁵ However, it will be worthwhile to note that transport disadvantage that is pervasively present in contemporary south Asia has longer and more complex roots than the binary of colonial/post-colonial can sufficiently explain. This is particularly pertinent because there seems to be some sort of unwritten consensus amongst the transport historians and mobility scholars of the region in which pre-colonial aspects remain largely unexamined, while colonial is investigated through the lens of race and the post-colonial largely along the lines of caste and sectarian identities. While this is certainly methodologically safe, it is however, an a-historical. And nowhere is this better illustrated than what can be called the curious case of 'respectable natives' on colonial Indian railways. Trains in India were introduced in mid-nineteenth century by the East India Company and became instantaneously popular with Indians. Interestingly, access to trains, of both better quality and speed was not restricted to the white ruling class alone. And though large majority of Indians who took to railways travelled in crowded and unsanitary third-class carriages, (a testimony to informal exclusionary practices designed on notions of racial difference and superiority); a tiny minority travelled first class or in private carriages, often alongside Europeans.²⁶ More crucially, railway companies in India created a special carriage designated as 'intermediate' for 'respectable natives' so they could travel without being physically proximate to poor Indians or poor whites.²⁷ One can suggest that the intermediate carriages in colonial India were nothing

²⁴ Scholars of Migration Studies have consistently identified how immigration policies are informed by racial prejudice and bias. See, Martin Bulmer and John Solomos (eds), *Migration and Race in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²⁵ Ian Kerr, *Engines of Change: The Railroads that Made India* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2007); also, Ian Kerr, *Building the Railways of Raj, 1850–1900* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁶ Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, *Imperial Technology and "Native" Agency: A Social History of Railways in Colonial India, 1850–1920* (London and New York NY: Routledge, 2018); Prasad Ritika, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁷ A. Mukhopadhyay, "Imperial Technology", chapter 4.

more than a peculiar creation of a colonial state obsessed with rank and status. But it will be worthwhile to acknowledge that the carriages were introduced after consultation with ‘respectable natives’. As such, it is illustrative of: (a) users negotiating with railway policies; and (b) users’ perspective offering a more complex intertwining of what Michael Freeman described as the ‘structural (here material realities of both private railway companies and middle-class Indians); and the ‘contingent’ (racial identities of both the ruler and the ruled).

This is but one example. However, user-centric methodology can be equally useful to explore trajectories of inequalities as evidenced through transport infrastructures far removed from colonial South Asia. For instance, there is growing evidence how communities across Global North are bearing the brunt of mobility poverty including spiralling cost of tickets to access ‘public transport’ while at the same time battling with rising cost of fuel that is pricing out automobility as a vaunted choice and symbol of individuality.²⁸ Here therefore is a chance to analyse how transport systems and transport disadvantage are intertwined with material inequities long simmering in post-industrial Global North [the feeling of being ‘left behind’] alongside notions of racial identities. As such, how transport users deploy different tactics to negotiate with transport infrastructures can provide occasions to interrogate the minutiae of intersections between the material and the social, in turn reinvigorating existing strands of research on histories of transport and mobility.

Divergent as the preceding instances are, they are also illustrative of the how the methodological diversion proposed in this paper will allow historians of transport to retain the benefits of transport history’s collaboration with the cultural and the mobility turns while realigning the remits of the discipline to engage more explicitly with material basis of inequities.

At a related level, and perhaps indirectly, foregrounding users offers the possibility of disaggregating monolithic labels that hide immense nuances and complexities. An excellent case in point is the labels: Global North and Global South. There is little denying that the terms continue to have a degree of relevance. And yet, following Anne Mahler’s idea of Global South as deterritorialized geography of capitalism’s externalities,²⁹ it is difficult not to question the precision of such labels. After all, as the foregoing instances from South Asia revealed, that looked through the viewing glass of capital, Global North/South appear more congruent and contingent than divergent.³⁰ Similarly, though more provocatively, focusing on users can provide opportunity to unpack labels such as

²⁸ There is a wide and expanding literature on the subject. For an overview, see <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmenvfru/602/60210.htm>; <https://ruralengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CAB-Transport-Report.pdf>; and <https://bettertransport.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/legacy-files/research-files/The-Future-of-Rural-Bus-Services.pdf> accessed 5 May 2022.

²⁹ Anne Garland, Mahler, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0055.xml> accessed 5 May 2022.

³⁰ This is not to argue that Global North or Global South are meaningless labels. Instead, this is to suggest that rapid rise and expansion of Asian economies (e.g., China, India) alongside stagnating economies of Global North has created interesting patchworks of inequality and prosperity that can be productively unpacked in writing histories of transport. See, Rory Horner, “Towards a new paradigm of global development? Beyond the limits of international development”, *Progress in Human Geography*, 44:3 (2020), 415–36. See also Rory Horner and David Hulme, “Global Development, Converging Divergence and Development Studies: A Rejoinder”, *Development and Change* 50:2 (2019), 495–510; Nikita Sud and Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, “Southern Discomfort: Interrogating the Category of the Global South”, *Development and Change* 53:6 (2022), 1123–50.

‘pre’ or ‘post-colonial’. Useful as these terms are, the examples of poor daily commuters in contemporary India and intermediate carriages in trains in mid-nineteenth-century South Asia illustrates a need to reconsider the relationship between inequities, hierarchy, and power in ‘pre/post-colonial’ while continuing to interrogate the ‘colonial’. More specifically, the contention here is to historicise roots of inequities that inform operational realities of transport infrastructures in contemporary contexts by mapping, with greater complexity and nuance, the continuities, and changes before and beyond the colonial interlude. This will offer a greater understanding of the role of changes induced (or not induced) by the ‘colonial’. Equally significantly, it will challenge the a-historic presumption that the ‘pre’ and ‘post-colonial’ are somehow more equitable.³¹

‘The historian’s craft’:³² transport users and ‘a view from below’

The endurance of the institutional perspective in transport history is possibly a reflection of constraints imposed by the nature of History’s disciplinary methodology, i.e. archival-based empirical evidence. And, archives, as historians of all shades know, privilege institutional, and textual. As such, the suggestion to move away from the institutional to users is a daunting prospect, not least for methodological reasons. This concluding section will outline few suggestions as possible pathways ahead – though, none of the following is intended as prescriptive.

Archivally speaking, foregrounding users and their interactions with transport infrastructures in historical contexts are likely to bring additional challenges than in contemporary settings. But at the same time, at the least since the publication of 1963 Edward Palmer Thompson’s now iconic *The Making of the English Working Class*³³ historians have been in a uniquely privileged place to balance empirically ground-breaking research with ‘history from below’. Equally relevantly, over last four decades or so, sub-disciplines of Gender History, Labour History and more recently, Global History and Environmental History have added to, and widened the methodological scopes and strategies of ‘history from below’. These endeavours are certainly illustrative of the ways in which ‘history from below’ can be incorporated in spatial and chronological contexts far removed from what was originally conceptualised by the paradigm’s ‘founding fathers’. At the same time, it also demonstrates the continued need of historians’ efforts to ‘rescue’ the marginalised or the left-out from ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’.³⁴ Take for instance, the ways in which Global Labour History – a distinct and growing branch of Labour History have pushed the traditional paradigm of ‘history from below’ by

³¹ The terms pre/post/colonial are certainly relevant for chronological signposting and indicating change in political regimes. However, it is equally important to underline that lineage of inequalities though compounded by colonialism; have longer and complex trajectories that are often not conveyed through neat chronological labels.

³² Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

³³ Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (re-print) (London: Penguin, 1991)

³⁴ *Ibid*, Preface, p-12.

expanding its spatial concerns beyond Europe and North America, while also disaggregating the term 'labour'.³⁵ It is both a theoretical departure, inasmuch it deviates from the traditional largely Eurocentric notion of who is a labourer; as much as it has brought in new empirical evidence (e.g., labourers of infrastructure construction in colonial South Asia) to bear upon existing ambits of histories of labour and labouring bodies.³⁶ Similarly, Labour History of Britain too, in recent decades have shown remarkable capacity to innovate the 'history from below' paradigm in diverse ways, often rather removed from the concerns of older labour history of institutionalism, while informed by historiographies of Subaltern, Global or Environmental histories.³⁷

These are but few examples. In short, there exists an array of theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinned by the conceptual and methodological sensibilities of 'history from below' paradigm that historians of transport may find suitable and relevant for their own sub-disciplinary needs. More importantly perhaps, if recent research directions in Labour or Environmental Histories are anything to go by, a shift away from the institutional towards a 'history from below' perspective will offer enriching and potentially new thematic, temporal, and spatial scope to transport history.³⁸ Indeed, some headway in this direction has already been made.³⁹ In last 8 years or so, historians of railways and steamboats in colonial South Asia have foregrounded interactions between users and the transport systems in the region, exploring the myriad ways in which 'native' South Asians used, adapted, or contested the steamboats and trains that were

³⁵ Michael, Hanagan and Marcel van der Linden, "New Approaches to Global Labor History", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 66 (2004), 1–11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, also see, Jan Breman, Arvind Das and Ravi Agarwal, *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2018); Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra (eds) *Labour Matters Towards Global Histories: Studies in Honour of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009).

³⁷ Neville Kirk, "Challenge, Crisis, and Renewal? Themes in the Labour History of Britain, 1960–2010", *Labour History Review*, 75:2 (2010), 162–180; Also, Katrina Navickas, "A return to materialism? Putting social history back into place", in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes (eds), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Antony Taylor, "The Transnational Turn in British Labour History", *Labour History review*, 81:1 (2016), 77–87.

³⁸ For Environmental History see, Robert Michael Morrissey and Roderick I. Wilson, "Introduction: Grassroots History: Global Environmental Histories from Below", *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 3 (2015), 1–13.

³⁹ I retain the original argument of the continued validity of Thompson's notion of 'history from below' for the following reasons. (A) As the instances gleaned from different sub-disciplines of History suggests, 'history from below', is certainly not an ossified theory, and can be re-imagined and used by historians of transport. (B) Equally significantly, there is little doubt that the Thompsonian paradigm is 'Eurocentric'. However, given lack of agreement amongst scholars of decolonisation and post-colonial theories about decentring European epistemology; as well as 'decline' of the subaltern in the Subaltern Studies – 'view from below' can be productively deployed in varied contexts, including Global South. See, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst, 2022); Sumit, Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies", in Sarkar Sumit (ed.), *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); also David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning And The Globalization Of South Asia* (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2002).

introduced by the English East India Company and subsequently the British Crown.⁴⁰ These recent researches have shown how users negotiated with transit infrastructure imposed by the colonial administration at an everyday level. More specifically, this research also highlights the gaps between policies engendered by railway and steamboat companies and limits of their implementation or enforcement in quotidian contexts⁴¹. Similarly, though in the context of late nineteenth-century Mexico, Michael Bess has shown how a wide range of users contested in varying ways the introduction of the electrified tram networks.⁴² Interestingly, most of these studies have analysed largely (though not exclusively) ‘colonial’ archives in varied and creative ways. As such, though challenging, it is possible to use archives to catch glimpses (and perhaps more) of the transport users – whether while negotiating with exclusionary policies or in other contexts. Given the nature of archives, it is likely that evidence substantiating the ‘view from below’ will be fragmentary. In such instances, one may use other sources⁴³ that complement or interrogate the previous sources; or one may read the available evidence ‘against the grain’.⁴⁴ A relevant example, drawn from colonial south Asia, is ticketless travelling – an exclusionary practice that affected those for whom even a very low- tariff by nineteenth-century standard was economically formidable.⁴⁵ Interestingly, ticketless travelling was rather widespread – a tell-tale evidence of users’ outright circumvention of an exclusionary practice. Yet, in the railway records, especially the statistics on passenger traffic and profit there is little recognition that ticketless travel was common.⁴⁶ But, when one combs through other records, including annual railway reports, reports of railway police, newspaper articles in both English and various Indian languages, travelogues written by Indian railway passengers, and reports on ‘moral and material progress’, reference to ticketless travelling is unmistakably present.⁴⁷ Admittedly, this an example where the breadth and vibrancy of archival sources lends a degree of depth to an analysis from below – and this may not be replicable or reproduced in other contexts. However, it

⁴⁰ Clive Dewey, *Steamboats on the Indus: The Limits of Western Technological Superiority in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), also, Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, *Imperial Technology and ‘Native’ Agency: A social history of railways in colonial India, 1850–1920* (London: Routledge, 2018) and Ritika Prasad, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴¹ The scope of this paper has not permitted a long-drawn discussion of the historiographical significance of recent research by scholars of Indian Railway system (especially Prasad and Mukhopadhyay). The aim here was to indicate exciting and innovative research – and as such, did not ‘draw out the larger implications of these works’.

⁴² Michael Bess, “Traffic Problems: Authority, Mobility and Technology in Mexico’s Federal District, 1867–1912”, *The Americas*, 78:2 (2021), 259–78.

⁴³ This may include non-textual ones; or sources from smaller (local or regional) repositories.

⁴⁴ This alludes to the methodology of the Subaltern School, for an overview see, Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Subaltern Studies in Retrospect and Reminiscence”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38:1 (2015), 23–27; also, David Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Mukhopadhyay, ‘Imperial Technology’, chapter 2.

⁴⁶ The silence is presumably to avoid discussion on how profit accrued from passenger traffic in late colonial India was far less than what the railway administrations desired.

⁴⁷ This information is gleaned from research in progress, and as such, further details are not yet available.

does indicate how a ‘traditional colonial archive can be used to allow centreing users’ perspective in underscoring how they negotiate/d transport policies and practices.⁴⁸

Beyond the archival dictates, in more contemporary contexts, Colin Divall’s notion ‘usable past’ can be a useful methodological tool.⁴⁹ It is instructive that despite a reasonable lapse of time since this call for ‘usable past’ went out, there have not had been significant use of this historiographical paradigm. This, however, is merely an observation, and not a criticism. After all, it will be difficult to ignore that implementing Colin Divall’s suggestions brings in two distinct and yet related elements viz., (a) non-academic participants, and (b) the individual perspective accrued from a wider audience. And, methodologically, incorporating evidence from these sources’ challenges ‘the historian’s craft’. As such, a methodological framework that absorbs elements of ‘usable past’, alongside other, more ‘traditional’ analytical tools may prove valuable. This will also have the advantage of flexibility – allowing the use of a range analytical tools relevant to the research questions. Additionally, it will have the possibility to bring a greater degree of individual presence within the scope of analysis – a significant element of a user-centric methodological template. At the same time however, being anchored within History’s disciplinary rigour will ensure that the individual perspectives even if it is suggestive of divergences or singularity will be extrapolated as indicative of broader patterns with caution.

Moving on: departures for transport history

This paper has suggested a methodological departure for transport history. It has argued for foregrounding transport users as one conduit to move away from the institutional perspective in transport history. To this end, the choice of the word users in this paper as opposed to passengers is deliberate. There is a vital distinction between the former, and the latter, not least because the latter accesses transport after buying a ticket. However, as is widely known, not all users of transport are passengers – ticketless travellers, victims of human trafficking, migrants smuggled around across the globe, being some (but not all) prominent examples. As such, a focus on users is likely to provide a truly broad and inclusive perspective from below, and yet permit registering heterogeneity and complexities of labels and identities.

Equally importantly, a user-centric approach will also allow transport historians to analyse the ‘structural and the contingent’ in tandem. Despite the appearance, this is

⁴⁸ For a useful discussion on a range of methodological and theoretical discussion on how ‘colonial’ archive can be constructively used without continuously underlining their coloniality, see, Kim Wagner and Ricardo, Roque (eds), *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (London: Palgrave, 2011).

⁴⁹ Colin Divall, “Mobilizing the History of Technology; and “Transport History, The Usable Past, and the Future of Mobility”, *Technology and Culture*, 51:4 (2010), 938–60. Also see, Govind Gopakumar, “Placing Automobility in postcolonial cities: towards an ontology of a displaced past”, *The Journal of Transport History*, 43:2 (2022), 172–93. Govind Gopakumar contends Colin Divall’s notion of ‘usable past’ is not appropriate for postcolonial societies, and instead argues for a ‘displaced past’. The latter is a useful theoretical intervention, but the claims of specificity of post-coloniality seems far-fetched, especially the disjuncture between the pre-colonial and the colonial.

not merely a repackaging of Michael Freeman's argument.⁵⁰ Instead, it is a response to how transport history's meanderings through various 'turns' have shifted the scopes of disciplinary research concerns farther away from the material embeddedness of transport infrastructure and its social implications.⁵¹ And it is equally a call to rethink in transport history the ways in which users negotiate the institutional through everyday practices. Given this, the paper can be interpreted as frustratingly old-fashioned, or methodologically impracticable. However, given the challenges posed by the predicted rise in number of migrants across the globe with the necessity of balancing the demands of immobility(es) (both voluntary and involuntary)⁵²; a paper underscoring users' perspective as a bridgehead to interrogate the intersection of transport infrastructure and material inequities will hopefully initiate further debates.⁵³


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⁵¹ Here 'material' aligns closely with the conceptualisation outlined by Benett and Joyce. See, Tony. Bennett and Patrick Joyce (ed.), *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London and New York NY: Routledge, 2010).

⁵² Migration is now widely recognised as the biggest contributor to mobility across globe. See, Nail, Thomas, *The Figure of Migrant* (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2015); for a useful overview on immobility, see, Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies", *International Migration Review*, 54:2 (2019), 328–55. Also see, Giuseppina Pellegrino (ed.), *The Politics of Proximity: Mobility and Immobility in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵³ Once again, this is not to undermine the gains from the "linguistic turn". But as David Cannadine suggested, "we need to get beyond the linguistic turn": David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1998), 18; also see, Navickas, "A return to materialism?"

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