

Inaugural journey: Train to Raneegunge

Iron and steam has civilized the mankind, let's give India the benefit of discovery.

The first train in eastern India started its maiden journey on 15th August 1854, from Howrah to Hooghly, to arouse and awaken the eastern world from deep slumber.

A fortnight later, the line was extended up to Pundooah and within six months, laying of tracks up to Raneegunge, the experimental line of the first division, was completed. Both the sections, Pundooah to Burdwan and Burdwan to Raneegunge, were thrown open for coaching and freight services on 3rd february 1855.--The History of the East Indian Railway by George Huddleston.

The first train to Raneegunge made its inaugural run from Howrah on Saturday, the 3rd February 1855, the day forces of technology were unleashed with introduction of Railways in the region to fulfill economic and military aims of East India Company.

The opening of the section from Howrah to Raneegunge, a distance of one hundred and twenty miles was widely covered in local Calcutta papers. Immense crowd of spectators, including the leading members of Calcutta society, had gathered at both sides of river Hooghly to watch the spectacle. A horse light field battery from Dumdum was in attendance at the Calcutta side of the river adding pomp and livery to the show. Ferry ghauts at both side of rivers, jetties and Howrah station terminus were tastefully decorated with evergreens, flowers, streamers and banners. The opening of Raneegunge section was planned as the brightest event in the reign of Lord Dalhousie, surpassing the pomp and show of the earlier occasion: running of first train by EIR on 15th August 1854,

Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General, being quite unwell, only inspected the arrangements and flagged off the train after a nineteen- gun salute, but did not board the train. The special train, carrying fifteen carriages, the longest train in Railway history of India, left Howrah at 9.40 after the reading of prayers by the Lord Bishop of Calcutta.

Advertisement of the proposed opening of the section and tentative timings as appearing in the local Calcutta paper Harkaru (Calcutta) 31 January 1855 (reprinted in *South Asian Research Centre for Advertisement, Journalism & Cartoons*) makes an interesting reading. The inaugural special would start from Howrah from 9.30 and reach Burdwan 12.30, return journey was planned at 3.30 P.M from Burdwan, after three hours of break for breakfast, toasts and celebrations. The ball would take place at town hall on 2nd February.

It is important to note that the special train was not taken to Raneegunge. Guests would not have been able to reach Calcutta same evening as steamer services were not run by EIR at night between Howrah and Calcutta due to safety considerations. The second train as part of regular commercial service followed the inaugural special after half an hour.

Initially during 1855-56, only three trains would run in EIR route, first train would go up to Hooghly, second up to Pandooah and third would run up to Raneegunge. The solitary coaching up train to Raneegunge would leave Howrah at 9.00 AM, reach Burdwan at 12.40 P.M and depart at 1.50 P.M, reaching Raneegunge at 4.42 P.M on same day. The down train would leave Raneegunge next day at 9.10 AM and reach Howrah at 4.45 P.M on same day inclusive of a long halt of almost one hour at Burdwan from 12.02 P.M to 1.05 P.M. –*Time table & fares, East Indian Railway Company Part viii page 61*

In addition to three coaching trains, one mixed train, consisting of goods wagons and one first class carriage, would leave Howrah 8.30 P.M. every night and would reach Ranee-gunge 6.35 A.M next day, the first incidence of running time tabled goods train in the world. Similarly in down direction the goods train along with first class carriage would leave Ranee-gunge at 8.30 PM every night and would reach Howrah at 7.40 AM the following day.

Advertisement as appearing in Harkaru:

Opening of the East Indian Railway, by the most noble the Marquis of Dalhousie, K.T Governor –General, on Saturday, 3rd February 1855.

The following arrangements have been made:-

The party invited to attend the official inauguration, will meet at the Howrah station at quarter-past 9 o'clock precisely, when a prayer will be read by the right reverend by the Lord Bishop of Calcutta.

The train will leave Howrah at half-past 9 o'clock, reaching Burdwan at about half-past 12.

Breakfast will be prepared at 1 o'clock at Burdwan

The train will return from Burdwan at half-past 3 o'clock.

At breakfast the following order and limitation of toasts will be observed:-

H.M The Queen

H.R.H Prince Albert and the royal family

The Governor-General of India

The army and Navy

The East Indian Railway Company

The Engineers and Locomotive superintendent and contractors of the railway

The Commercial interests of India

Dr. O'Shaughnessy and the electric telegraph

The ball will be given at the Town Hall, Calcutta. The 2nd February 1855.

The order of toast was the Queen, Prince Consort, Royal family, the Governor General, the Army and Navy, EIR company, closely followed by the engineers and locomotive superintendent and contractors of the company. One can see the importance given to contractors who were treated as equal partners in building the Railways those days and commanded equal respect. EIR was the first railway company in the country to introduce outsourcing of railway constructions, other railway companies have been doing the work departmentally so far.

Toast to commercial interest, similar to obeisance to goddess of wealth, how one can forget the prime objective of the whole endeavour. One finds the mention of only one official by name, other than Prince Albert, Dr. O'Shaughnessy.

Sir William O'Shaughnessy Brooke, a brilliant scientist, was an Edinburgh doctor of medicine and Fellow of the Royal Society, who introduced the first successful use of intravenous replacement therapy for treatment of cholera. His career in India was distinguished in several spheres: chemistry, drug clinical trials, science education, under water engineering, pharmacology in which he introduced cannabis indica to Europe, and in the field of electric telegraphy where he became the superintendent of telegraphs for India.

Dalhousie, had recognised the singular contribution of Sir William O'Shaughnessy Brooke, and was instrumental in his knighthood. Severely ill, Dalhousie was forced to return to England in 1855, and in the first letter he wrote when he landed at Southampton in 1856, he notes that one officer he recommended for knighthood had already been honored by the Queen, and "I am now going to fight for O'Shaughnessy (Director-General of Telegraphs) and Stephenson (who built the first railway)." As a result, O'Shaughnessy was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1856.

Opening of the Bengal Railways up to Raneegunge and laying of telegraph lines to Bombay and Madras, not only laid a modern network of communication and transport but played a major role during first war of independence, in tilting the balance in favour of East India Company. These proved to be invaluable tools of the empire.

Dalhousie in 1855 was quoted as saying : "Yesterday the Bengal railway was opened for 122 miles... Two days before, the electric telegraph was opened to the public from Calcutta to Bombay, to Madras, and to Attock on the Indus. Fifteen months ago not a yard of this was laid, or a signaller trained. Now we have 3050 miles opened. The communication between Calcutta and Madras, direct by land, a month ago, took 12 days-- yesterday a communication was made, round by Bombay, in two hours. Again, I ask, are we such slow coaches out here?" (Baird 1910: 336.)

Referring to the opening of the railway, one of the Calcutta papers, the Hurkaru, makes some very appropriate reflections upon it: terms it an event, which will be remembered in coming centuries and how it will be viewed by Government, Merchants, Army, Philanthropists, Ministers of Christ etc...

"The official opening of the Indian Railway forms an era in our history. Centuries to come almanacs will tell our successors of the event, and chronicle the 3rd of February, 1855 as big with momentous interests for the welfare of India. We publish to-day a full account of the proceedings on Saturday last ; and to draw public attention to it is the very least that we can do. The circumstance will be viewed in numberless different lights, according to the views, the hopes, and the occupations of different men. Government will look to it as a means for developing the, resources of the country, and of multiplying the revenues of the state. Merchants will look to it as the sure highway for the growth of their traffic, and the instrument for swelling their fortunes, the army will look to it as a means for concentrating power, for strengthening our military positions, and for insuring peace. The philanthropist will look to it as an agency for uprooting barbarism, for destroying the powers of social evil, and for bringing the people into contact with civilization. The ministers of Christ will look to it as facilitating their labours, and enabling them to penetrate into the remote regions of the land, to carry thither the sacred message with which they are intrusted. All these, and many more whom we cannot name, must have viewed that opening scene of the railway on Saturday last with peculiar gratification, and each according to the conformation of their own minds with individual hopes and interests." - Allen's Indian mail and register of intelligence for British and foreign India, china, and all parts of the east-1855 volume-XIII

All the stations en route were brightly decorated and local villagers of the area had assembled there to witness the historic event. Running of the fire chariot evoked wonder, fear and reverence amongst most of people who had gathered all over the rail track to witness the train, the majestic fire belching leviathan, capable to run in both directions without any external aid.

Ladies welcomed the train with blowing of conch shells and by putting vermilion over the locomotive as a mark of reverence to the new mysterious power, while small children were gazing in ignorant admiration.

The following from one of the papers will indicate the excitement created by the event :
" To ignorant natives who understand nothing of the means by which the Aag ka Gahrie, or fire chariot, is moved, few things could have been more astounding or more convincing of the miraculous power possessed by the English. One curious explanation was that the locomotive was made to go simply by the "Hookum or order of Lord Dalhousie !"

The Sydney Morning Herald, Friday 25 May 1855, based on extracts from Calcutta papers of 6th and 8th February 1855 had reported:

"About 8 a.m. numbers of those invited to proceed to Burdwan, arrived at the ghaut and were ushered through a long arcade, bowered over with flowers and evergreens, to the water's edge, where two steam-ferrys, engaged by the Railway Company for the occasion, and very tastefully decorated with evergreens, flowers, streamers and banners, conveyed them to the opposite bank of the Hooghly, where another bowered arcade led them to the interior of the railway station. The terminus itself was also very tastefully decorated, and the houses at the Ghauts at either side of the river, in the evening very brilliantly illuminated.

Shortly after 9 o'clock, Lord Dalhousie, accompanied by his staff, arrived at the station, receiving from the battery at the Calcutta side, a salute of nine-teen guns. His Lordship looked pale, and in evidently delicate health. He excused himself from proceeding with the trains; but inspected the arrangements, and remained present until the first train started. The Bishop of Calcutta arrived previous to its departure. The entire company assembled amounted to nearly 700 individuals, including the leading Members of Calcutta Society, the Bishop, and a large number of the clergy ; the Judges of the Supreme Court, the Judges of the Suddur, and a great many notabilities connected with the civil service, the bar, army and navy.

The first train left Howrah, at twenty minutes to 10 a.m., and arrived at Burdwan at half-past 12. The various stations along the line were very neatly decorated, and large masses of the native population poured out from the various villages to obtain a glimpse of the largest trains that have as yet passed along the rail in India, each of them on this occasion numbering fifteen carriages.

The scene at Burdwan station was immortalized in a sketch published in the illustrated London news ,dated 14 April 1855 ,where the local populace, commons on feet and landlords riding elephant, alike had thronged the station to witness the spectacle.

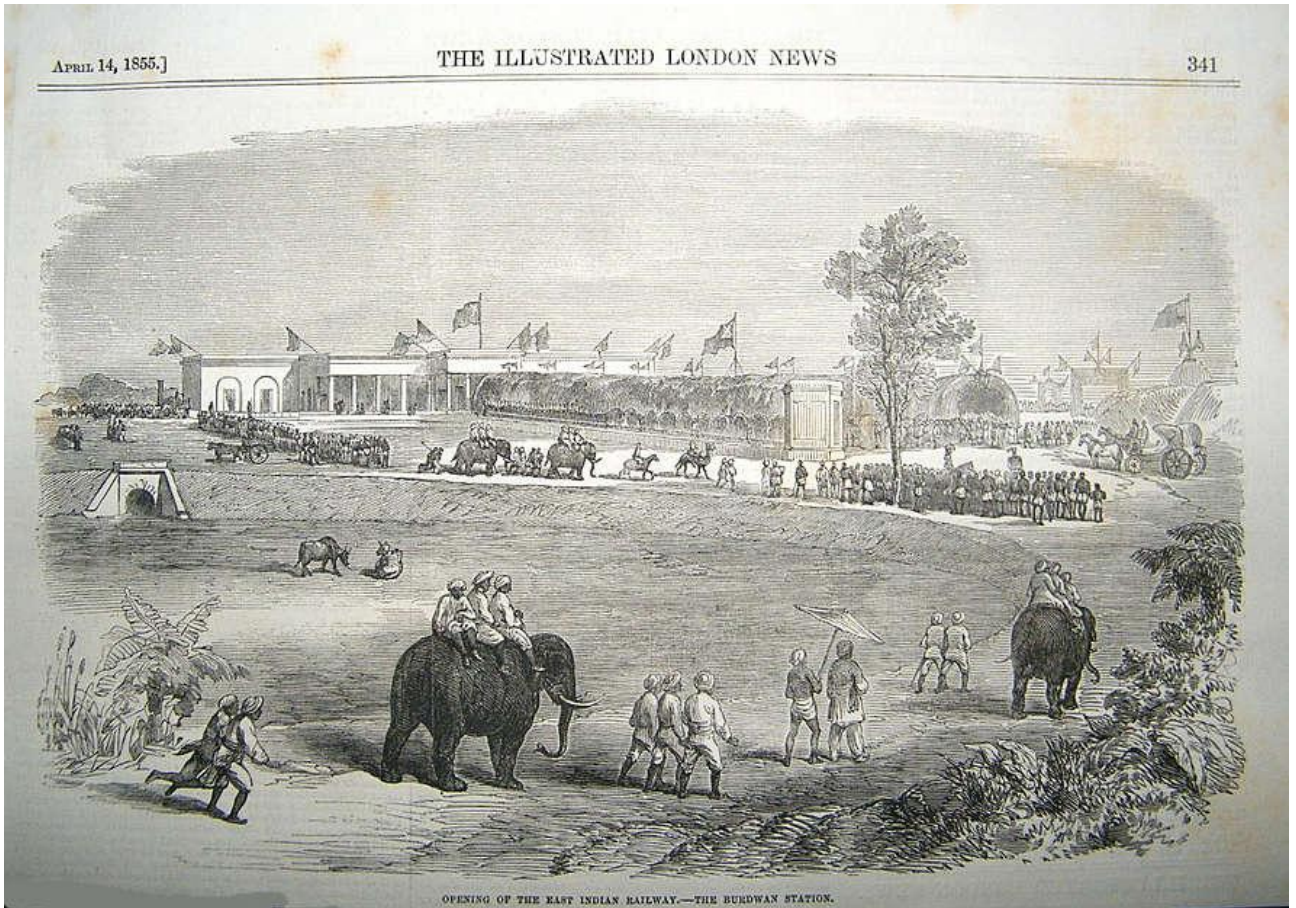
The exquisite arrangements made at Burdwan and return journey have been chronicled in details by the correspondent of Calcutta Papers:

“At Burdwan another decorated passage led from the station to where breakfast was set, in the Governor-General's tents; and the entire party without the slightest delay, all evidently in the best possible appetite, partook of the repast, scarcely waiting till the Bishop, had breathed a prayer over it. As to the viands, they were of the best description, and with the wines, &c., refilled very great credit upon the purveyors: covers were laid for 700. This repast was followed by toasts and speeches, which took up a considerable time; nevertheless, all seemed to enjoy the occasion as one full of promise to India. The party having broken up, left the banqueting tents and moved towards the trains, the first of which left Burdwan at 20 minutes to 4, and arrived at Howrah at 20 minutes to 7, stopping at several of the intermediate stations. The second train arrived about half an hour afterwards. On the whole the day was as pleasant a one as perhaps Anglo-Indians have ever experienced in this country. The arrangements were all of the most excellent character, and reflected the highest credit upon every person connected with the Railway.”

The inaugural train run to Raneegunge from Burdwan has been mentioned in the memoir of William Tayler (1808-1892), a famous civil servant, a magistrate and collector of Burdwan who later rose to be commissioner of Patna. A great crowd had gathered to witness the interesting event and as soon as signal was given and doors were opened, there rushed the youths helter skelter to enter the carriage. The whole carriage was jam packed, all the youths were huddled together but still the guard was pushing the people inside and finally the door was closed. A dog had entered the carriage in the melee and was merrily biting the exposed ankles of the passengers, pressed inside the coach, who were crying in agony.

“The scene was supremely ludicrous, the stifling crowd squeezed together as with a vice, the weak melancholy tone and expression of the victims, complacent grin of the guard and the evident enjoyment of the spectators, formed such an absurd scene that shouts of laughter greeted the sufferers instead of sympathy”.

Thirty-eight Years in India: From Juganath to the Himalaya Mountains
by William Tayler Publication date 1881 Publisher W. H. Allen



OPENING OF THE EAST INDIAN RAILWAY.—THE BURDWAN STATION.

Calcutta morning chronicle, February 5th, 1855 edition called the event as the best arranged, most perfect and most completely successful public ceremony, a testimony to the excellent arrangements made by EIR officials :

“The official opening of the East-India railway took place on Saturday, February 3, and we can safely and sincerely say that, apart from the paramount interest and importance of the celebration itself, the whole affair was the best arranged, the most perfect, and the most completely successful public ceremony and rejoicing it has ever been our good fortune to witness in India. We are not here going even to touch upon the more elevated considerations necessarily suggested by a mention of, or reference to, this great and magnificent public work,—to the value, the immediate usefulness, and the brilliant future promises and results of which it would be totally impossible to do anything like justice in the columns of a daily journal, and which suggest themselves so strongly, so numerous, and so impressively to the mind of even the least thinking and reflecting person, that to attempt to embody and convey them in words is, we freely confess, beyond the reach of our capacity, and the scope of our literary pretensions. In confining ourselves to a mere sketch of the ceremony, and the excursion and entertainment that took place on Saturday, we conceive that we are doing more justice to the splendid and mighty public work, to celebrate the opening of which so many persons were collected, than if we were to make a necessarily feeble attempt to portray to them and to the public the varied and elevated sentiments which the inauguration of the Great Indian railway, on Saturday last, cannot, we should think, have failed to arouse in the breast of every person who had the good fortune to be, present at, and to share in, the interesting ceremony. The company invited to take part in the festivity assembled at the Howrah Railway terminus about nine o'clock on Saturday morning. We are glad to see that there was no exclusiveness at all apparent in the issue of invitations to take share in a ceremony equally interesting to all classes and individuals in this country, and we may safely and with truth say that, never during our experience of public celebrations in India have we seen society at large so well and so generally represented as on Saturday last.”

Crowd control, reception of guests and their distribution in different carriages was done exquisitely, a perfect blend of a military parade precision and the gaiety of holiday recreation, as reported by Calcutta morning chronicle:

“The arrangements for the accommodation of the large and varied concourse of people assembled, and for their distribution to the carriages intended for their reception and conveyance were perfection itself, and there was not the slightest confusion, or disappointment, or crowding; every step in the proceedings being marked with the precision and regularity of a military parade, and at the same time enlivened and brightened by the ease, the hilarity, and the gaiety of a holiday recreation. The Governor-General was unable, from ill-health, to take the lead in the entire celebration, and go through the journey to Burdwan and the festivities prepared at that station, but his lordship was present at the Howrah terminus when the ceremonial was opened by the bishop reading the prayer, and he witnessed

the starting of the trains on the excursion, after which he returned to Calcutta. The first train left the Howrah station at twenty minutes to ten o'clock ; and the second followed in about, we believe, a quarter of an hour after. Along the line, the inhabitants of the different towns, stations, and villages near which the trains passed were assembled in thousands and ten of thousands to greet them and the excursionists, and cheered lustily and repeatedly as the carriages shot by ; everything bearing the appearance of rejoicing and prosperity, and the entire company reaching Burdwan at about twenty minutes past one o'clock without the slightest interruption or accident Whatever”

Preparations at Burdwan were extremely lavish and on a scale so grand that it had never been equalled in past. Though Governor of Bengal was present but the event was chaired by Mr. Stephenson, the agent of EIR. It was a dream coming true for him, result of years of devoted work, silent untiring energy and courageous perseverance against all odds, most magnificent work ever undertaken in empire.

After the unbounded hospitality and completion of toasts, the guests boarded their carriages for the return journey.

On arrival at Burdwan the assembled company proceeded through the station-house, and down an arched avenue of foliage handsomely decorated with flowers, drapery, and flags, to the enormous tent in which the banquet was prepared ; about six hundred persons, according to our calculation, sitting down to the repast In justice to the lavish munificence of the entertainers, and the ability of those who prepared the entertainment, we must say that we have never seen the latter equalled in India. The thing was, obviously done, as all these things should be done when undertaken at all, without any regard to stinting economy ; carte blanche having been no doubt given by the Railway Superintendent for providing and preparing everything that could conduce to the gratification of the guests, and the completeness of the entertainment as a display of unrestricted and unbounded hospitality.

After justice had been done to the feast, the toasts of the day, as previously arranged, were brought forward, Mr. Stephenson having previously read a paper explanatory of the Governor-General's unwilling absence from the interesting ceremony and the celebration of the brightest event of his reign, distinguished as it has been by such great incidents of national progress, civilisation, and improvement. Sir Arthur Buller, Mr. Dorin, and others spoke with considerable effect in bringing forward the different toasts, for which thanks were appropriately returned by representatives of the different professions, spheres of society, or public works and departments which were complimented on the occasion. After these toasts had been given and responded to, the hour for returning to Calcutta had arrived, and the company re-entered the carriages and started for the Presidency, where the first train arrived before seven o'clock, the second being slightly detained by a trifling contretemps which occurred near the Howrah terminus, but which, with the exception of a trifling delay, was attended with no disagreeable consequences. Mr. Stephenson and the company whom he represents may well be proud of the entire and triumphant success of the splendid ceremony and the magnificent hospitality with which they inaugurated the great public work whose opening was celebrated on Saturday with such liberality and good taste. Of all those who were assembled at the celebration, the most unobtrusive, the most unpretending, and the most retiring, was the originator, the projector, and the perfecter of the magnificent undertaking whose success had brought together so large and varied a party, representing all classes of the capital of India—Rowland McDonald Stephenson. He must have felt himself repaid on Saturday for the years of devoted labour, of silent untiring energy, of steady and courageous perseverance, which he has calmly expended on the greatest public work that has yet illustrated, or perhaps ever will illustrate, the British rule in India. It is something to have made a historic name in the brightest page of the peaceful annals of our country, a name that will be an honour to his children's children to the latest generation, and will be associated with the improvement, the progress, and the civilization of this immense empire, and of its hundred and fifty millions of inhabitants, until time shall be no more. This Mr. Stephenson has done whilst yet in his prime ; and we are only expressing the sentiments of the entire community here when we wish him many long years of honour, and health, and prosperity, to bring his great work to completion, and to contemplate with just and unalloyed pride the innumerable blessings and improvements which he has been the main instrument of conferring upon this rapidly-improving country, with the best interests of which his name is now indissolubly connected.”

The role of Railwaymen of all ranks, in making the event a grand success, was widely recognised and their civility won universal admiration and tributes from all the guests:

It would be unjust to close this slight and rapidly-written sketch of the interesting proceedings of Saturday without paying a well deserved tribute of praise to the railway employes and subordinates of all ranks along the line, whose activity, obliging demeanour, and civility, were the theme of universal admiration and remark ; and who fully and heartily seconded the wishes of their superiors to contribute in every possible way to the safety, the comfort, and the happiness of every individual present at the celebration of the opening of the railway. We have never been present at any public ceremony in India which could in the remotest degree compare with that of Saturday for importance, general interest, completeness, and entire success ; and we cannot expect ever again to experience so fully the sensations occasioned by the celebration which we were then so fortunate as to witness.—Calcutta Morning Chronicle, Feb. 5.

Lord Dalhousie had played a major role in bringing Railways to India and had wanted to attend the banquet at Burdwan, but his poor health did not permit him to undertake the 150 miles long Rail journey and he sent his message to Mr. Stephenson, which was read at the banquet:

"We now pass to the official opening of the railway. Saturday, February 3, 1855, was the day chosen and Burdwan was the scene of the festivities that followed, but unfortunately owing to severe indisposition, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General, could not do more than attend the ceremony at Howrah station. Lord Dalhousie's absence was a great disappointment he had taken the greatest interest in the railway and had looked forward to being present, but it was out of the question and in a sympathetic letter to Mr. Stephenson he wrote:- "I shall be present at Howrah but I am conscious that I am wholly unfit for the performance of the remainder of the task, which would invoke a railway journey of 150 miles, a midday banquet and the addressing of 400 people under a Bengal sun."

- Bengal Past & Present, Vol II, Pt.I, Jan-July 1908. Pages 55-61.

A public function was also organised at Raneegunge and we find the mention of the event appearing in a small footnote for a lunch invitation of four hundred persons to celebrate the opening of the section to Raneegunge:

"The Railway will be opened by the Governor-General on Saturday, the 3rd proximo ; four hundred invitations have been issued to a luncheon at Reegunge".—Allens Indian mail-July 3 1855

The line would prove to be a great success story vindicating the stand taken by Lord Dalhousie in sanctioning experimental line to Raneegunge. During the fifteen weeks after the line had been opened as far as Raneegunge, the number of passengers carried was 179,404 or an average of nearly 12,000 a week, and the earnings rose to about £900 a week, paving the way for commercial viability of the endeavor, without considering the strategic and military advantages in the years to come.

The week would prove to be an epochal event in the history of India, Dalhousie later claimed that he had unleashed in India the "great engines of social improvement, which the sagacity and science of recent times had previously given to Western nations—I mean Railways, uniform Postage, and the Electric Telegraph."

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