
This fascinating book covers various dimensions of the Indian railways since 1843. During British rule, despite opposition from certain quarters, railway systems were introduced in India. Once trains started running, a number of railway stations were built as stopping points. Over the years, railway stations also graduated from empty spaces to mini markets. These stations, even today, are places which have introduced many popular authors to readers. Chatterjee tells us that the idea of a railway library cum bookstore was first conceived in Parisian railway stations, by French publisher Louis Christophe Francois Hachette. Later, another Frenchman, Emile Edouard Moreau, began selling collections of his friend A. H. Wheeler’s books at London railway stations. Subsequently, Moreau, A. H. Wheeler and Arthur Lisle Wheeler opened their offices in London and Allahabad. In India, the first Wheeler book stalls were opened at Allahabad in the 1870s. Rudyard Kipling, among others, became one of the famous authors in imperial India thanks to Wheeler book stalls. Even today, book stalls are important landmarks at Indian railway stations. Although it is beyond the scope of this particular book, religious texts published from Gita press, Gorakhpur, have become more popular because of their appearance at stalls at almost all railway stations across India.

Railway stations were one of the first visible sites of modernization in India. Trains were the first to provide equal spaces for inter-religion and inter-caste interactions in India. However, discrimination was still there in the allocation of space based on race and colour. Locals were not allowed in compartments reserved for Europeans. This was a phenomenon across the colonies which contributed to resistance against ‘the imperialists’. Mahatma Gandhi was one of the first leaders who, after being thrown out of the first-class compartment of a train in South Africa, realized the need to fight against this racial discrimination practised by Europeans against the natives.