



Railway journey as a social space: A socio-psychological study of passenger behaviour, social interaction and perception

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Abstract

Railway journeys are commonly understood as forms of physical mobility connecting one geographical location with another. However, a train is also a temporary social environment in which strangers, regular commuters, vendors, workers, students, elderly passengers and other social groups share a confined space and negotiate proximity, privacy, interaction and everyday behavioural norms. The present qualitative study proposes to examine the Namkhana–Sealdah railway journey as a social space rather than merely a transportation experience. The route is particularly significant because it connects the southern part of South 24 Parganas with the metropolitan centre of Kolkata and serves everyday mobility between rural, semi-urban and urban settings. Parliamentary records have described the Sealdah–Lakshmikantapur–Namkhana railway connection as an important transport link for commuters from South 24 Parganas. Drawing on Goffman's theory of interaction order, Lefebvre's conception of social space, Augé's notion of non-place, and contemporary scholarship on railway sociality and mobile emotions, the study conceptualises the train compartment as a transient but socially meaningful environment. A qualitative ethnographic approach involving participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews is proposed. The analysis focuses on passenger behaviour, interpersonal distance, verbal and non-verbal interaction, helping behaviour, privacy, crowding, emotional experience, occupation, gender, age, mobility practices and perception of changing places along the route. The study argues that the railway journey can be understood as a moving social microcosm in which anonymity and familiarity, isolation and sociability, rurality and urbanity, and individual privacy and collective life coexist

Keywords: Railway journey, social space, passenger behaviour, social interaction, qualitative research, South 24 Parganas, Namkhana, Sealdah, socio-psychology

Introduction

A journey by train is not simply movement from one geographical point to another. It is simultaneously a movement through physical space, social space, psychological experience and cultural landscape. Passengers enter the railway carriage with different identities, occupations, purposes and expectations, but temporarily become members of a shared travelling community. The train therefore provides a distinctive setting for observing how individuals negotiate personal space, social proximity, communication, cooperation, conflict, privacy and collective norms. The Namkhana–Sealdah railway route provides an especially interesting context for examining these processes. The Sealdah South railway network connects Kolkata with southern parts of South 24 Parganas, including the Namkhana region. Parliamentary records have described the Sealdah–Lakshmikantapur–Namkhana railway connection as an important link for daily commuters because of the limited availability of alternative public transport in parts of South 24 Parganas. Thus, the train is not merely a means of transportation; for many passengers it constitutes an important part of everyday social and economic life.

The social significance of railway travel has been recognised in mobility studies. Bissell (2010) [2], for example, argues that public transport should be understood through the affective and embodied experiences generated among passengers. His analysis demonstrates that social relations within train compartments can emerge through atmosphere, bodily proximity, movement and non-verbal

communication. Similarly, Jensen (2012) [6] demonstrates that commuting involves emotional practices that contribute to the production of social space within trains.

Contemporary mobile ethnographic research further indicates that railway compartments are neither completely social nor completely individualised environments. Rather, they constitute complex collective spaces in which passengers simultaneously maintain distance and engage in subtle forms of interaction. Research on Dutch Intercity trains, for example, found that although mobile-phone use may limit direct conversation, passengers continue to communicate through subtle non-verbal practices and implicit behavioural conventions. Pütz (2018) similarly examined how strangers initiate conversations on public trains and showed that interaction between unfamiliar passengers is shaped by implicit interactional rules.

From a sociological perspective, Goffman's (1963) [5] concept of the **interaction order** is useful for understanding these everyday encounters. Passengers continually interpret the behaviour of others and regulate their own conduct according to situational expectations. A seat, doorway, luggage space, window area or standing space can therefore become a socially negotiated territory. Lefebvre's (1991) [7] conception of social space provides another useful theoretical foundation. Space is not simply a physical container within which social activities occur; it is continuously produced through human practices, representations and lived experiences. The railway carriage can consequently be understood as a socially produced space in which mobility, bodily proximity, institutional rules and passenger practices interact.

At the same time, Augé's (1995)^[1] concept of the non-place raises an important contrasting perspective. Airports, motorways, railway stations and other spaces of mobility may appear to produce anonymity rather than enduring social relationships. Yet subsequent mobility research demonstrates that such spaces may contain considerable sociality. The railway compartment may therefore be understood as a temporary social space in which relationships are often brief but nevertheless psychologically and socially meaningful.

The present study consequently proposes to investigate the Namkhana–Sealdah train journey as a socio-psychological phenomenon. Rather than examining railway infrastructure alone, it focuses on the people who inhabit the train temporarily, their behaviour, interactions, emotions and perceptions of the places through which they travel.

Conceptual Background

1. Railway carriage as social space

A railway carriage is a physically bounded environment containing people who may have little or no prior relationship with one another. Unlike a private home, the carriage provides limited personal control over space. Passengers must negotiate seating, standing, luggage, noise, movement and proximity.

Research on railway journeys indicates that passengers develop strategies for managing these circumstances. These may include maintaining bodily distance, using mobile phones, reading, looking through windows, avoiding eye contact, initiating conversation, sharing information or temporarily claiming particular portions of space. Railway sociality therefore involves both interaction and non-interaction.

2. Interaction order and everyday behaviour

Goffman's (1963)^[5] interaction-order perspective suggests that social life is maintained through small behavioural conventions. In a train compartment these may include:

1. Asking whether a seat is occupied;
2. Adjusting one's body to accommodate another passenger;
3. Helping elderly or physically vulnerable passengers;
4. Allowing others to board or alight;
5. Sharing information about stations;
6. Regulating voice volume;
7. Negotiating luggage;
8. Avoiding unnecessary intrusion;
9. Responding to crowding.

These apparently ordinary behaviours provide important evidence concerning social norms and interpersonal expectations.

3. Mobility and emotional experience

Mobility is also an emotional experience. Jensen (2012)^[6] argues that emotions are not simply carried by passengers into transport spaces; they are produced and modified through commuting practices. Similarly, Bissell (2010)^[2] conceptualises public transport in terms of changing affective atmospheres.

Consequently, the same railway journey may be experienced as

Comfortable → Crowded → Sociable → Stressful → Peaceful → Familiar

Depending on time, passenger density, purpose of travel and interpersonal encounters.

4. Railway journey and perception of place

The movement from Namkhana towards Sealdah also involves a transition through changing landscapes and settlement forms. The passenger does not experience these places merely as geographical coordinates. Places acquire psychological meanings through memory, occupation, livelihood, familiarity and expectation.

The journey can therefore be conceptualised as a movement across a continuum

Rural/Peripheral → Semi-Urban → Suburban → Metropolitan

The passenger's perception of this transition may be influenced by visible landscapes, markets, stations, agricultural activities, housing patterns, commercial development and increasing population density.

Objectives of the Study

The study proposes the following objectives:

- O1:** To explore the railway journey from Namkhana to Sealdah as a temporary social space.
- O2:** To examine the patterns of verbal and non-verbal social interaction among passengers.
- O3:** To understand how passengers negotiate personal space, privacy, crowding and interpersonal proximity.
- O4:** To explore passengers' emotional experiences and behavioural responses during the journey.
- O5:** To examine passengers' perceptions of the changing physical, social and cultural landscape between Namkhana and Sealdah.
- O6:** To explore how age, gender, occupation, travelling purpose and frequency of travel influence the experience of railway sociality.
- O7:** To understand how familiarity with the route contributes to a sense of place, belonging and everyday social identity.

Research Questions

- Q1:** How do passengers experience the Namkhana–Sealdah train as a social space?
- Q2:** What forms of verbal and non-verbal interaction occur among passengers?
- Q3:** How do passengers negotiate personal space, privacy and interpersonal proximity?
- Q4:** What emotions and psychological experiences are associated with the railway journey?
- Q5:** How do passengers perceive the changing rural, semi-urban and urban environments along the route?
- Q6:** How do age, gender, occupation, travel purpose and frequency of travel shape passenger experience?
- Q7:** In what ways does repeat railway travel contribute to familiarity, belonging and perception of place?

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design. Ethnography is appropriate because the research seeks to understand everyday behaviour in its natural context rather than measure predetermined psychological variables quantitatively.

The train journey itself constitutes the principal field setting. The researcher would undertake repeated journeys between Namkhana and Sealdah at different times of day and, where feasible, on different days of the week. The investigator collects all data through combines the approaches of Participant observation, non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, reflexive field notes and thematic analysis.

2. Field Setting

The field of study is the Namkhana–Sealdah railway corridor in South 24 Parganas and Kolkata. The Namkhana end represents a predominantly southern/peripheral setting, while the journey towards Sealdah provides an opportunity to examine changing patterns of settlement, mobility and social interaction. The railway connection is part of the Sealdah South suburban railway system.

The journey should be examined the sequence of socially meaningful spaces involving stations, platforms, railway compartments, and entry- exit points, changing passenger groups and surrounding landscapes.

3. Participants of the study

A purposive sample of approximately **50–70 participants** selected for the qualitative study.

Participants were regular daily commuters, students, teachers, office employees, traders and small businesspersons, informal-sector workers, women commuters, elderly passengers, occasional travellers and railway-related workers in different ages.

4. Data Collection

Participant Observation

The researcher systematically observes during two years: Boarding Behaviour, Seating Practices, Standing Patterns, Interpersonal Distance, Conversations, Helping Behaviour,

Conflict and Negotiation, use of mobile phones, Eating and Drinking, Passenger Movement, Interactions with Vendors, Interactions with Railway Personnel, Reactions to Crowding, Behaviour during Delays a Behaviour while approaching major stations.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews may explore questions such as:

1. What does travel by this train mean to you?
2. How do you usually interact with other passengers?
3. Do you feel comfortable talking to strangers?
4. How do you manage personal space when the train becomes crowded?
5. Have you ever received help from an unknown passenger?
6. Have you ever helped another passenger?
7. How does your experience change between the Namkhana and Sealdah portions of the journey?
8. Which places or stations have particular significance for you?
9. How do you feel when approaching Sealdah?
10. How does repeated travel affect your relationship with fellow passengers and the route?

Data Analysis

The data may be analysed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006)^[3].

The analytical process would involve:

Phase 1: familiarisation with field notes and interview transcripts;

Phase 2: generation of initial codes;

Phase 3: identification of candidate themes;

Phase 4: review and refinement of themes;

Phase 5: defining and naming themes; and

Phase 6: producing the final narrative.

A possible coding structure is

Initial Codes	Sub-themes	Major Themes
seat sharing, standing, luggage	spatial negotiation	Personal Space
Greeting, Conversation, Silence	Communication	Social Interaction
Helping Elderly Passengers	Cooperation	Prosocial Behaviour
Crowding, Pushing, Noise	Discomfort	Psychological Experience
Mobile Phone, Headphones	Withdrawal	Privacy Management
Familiar Passengers	Repeated Encounters	Social Familiarity
Fields, Markets, Settlements	Landscape Perception	Perception of Place
Namkhana–Kolkata Transition	Rural–Urban Movement	Spatial Transformation

Thematic Findings Framework

Since actual field transcripts have not been supplied, the following themes should be treated as an analytical framework to be tested against field data, rather than as fabricated empirical findings.

Theme 1: The Train as a Temporary Community

The train can be conceptualised as a temporary community in which individuals with different social backgrounds share a common immediate objective—reaching their destinations. The common journey creates a limited form of collective identity. This corresponds with mobility research showing that railway passengers can form transient collectives even when they have no continuing relationship with one another.

The social relationship may last only for a few minutes or for the duration of the journey, yet it can nevertheless involve conversation, assistance, humour, information exchange and mutual recognition.

Theme 2: Negotiation of Personal Space

Personal space becomes especially significant in crowded railway compartments. Passengers must continuously negotiate bodily distance, seating positions, luggage and movement. The carriage therefore illustrates the psychological tension between individual territoriality and collective mobility.

Research on railway journeys has shown that passengers may temporarily claim portions of shared space through seats, personal belongings and bodily positioning. From a

socio-psychological perspective, this may be understood as a negotiation between:

Individual privacy ↔ Collective necessity

The passenger cannot completely control the environment but develops behavioural strategies to create a temporary sense of personal territory.

Theme 3: Verbal and Non-Verbal Social Interaction

Interaction does not necessarily require extended conversation. Eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, bodily orientation, movement, seating choices and silence can all communicate social meanings.

Research on public trains has demonstrated that passengers frequently rely upon subtle non-verbal communication even when direct conversation is limited.

For example, a passenger may communicate

- “May I sit here?”
- “This seat is occupied.”
- “Please move slightly.”
- “You can go first.”
- “This is your station.”

without necessarily producing a complete verbal exchange. The train therefore becomes a setting for studying micro-level social communication.

Theme 4: Familiarity Among Strangers

Repeated journeys may transform strangers into familiar faces. A person who was initially unknown may gradually become recognisable through repeated encounters.

This creates an interesting intermediate social category.

Stranger → familiar stranger → acquaintance → travelling companion

Such relationships may be particularly important in commuter cultures because repeated co-presence can generate recognition without necessarily producing intimate friendship.

Theme 5: Helping Behaviour and Everyday Solidarity

Railway compartments can provide opportunities for spontaneous helping behaviour.

Examples potentially observable in the field include:

- a. Offering seats to elderly passengers;
- b. Assisting passengers with luggage;
- c. Guiding passengers about stations;
- d. Helping someone board or alight;
- e. Providing information to unfamiliar travellers;
- f. Assisting children or vulnerable passengers.

Such behaviour can be interpreted through the concept of everyday pro-sociality.

The train thus provides a natural environment for examining how cooperation emerges among people who may have no prior social relationship.

Theme 6: Crowding, Stress and Emotional Regulation

Crowding can influence emotional experience. Noise, physical proximity, heat, delayed services, lack of seating and competition for space may generate irritation or discomfort.

However, the psychological experience of crowding is unlikely to be determined exclusively by passenger density. Familiarity, purpose of travel, expectations and perceived control may also influence how the same physical environment is experienced.

Bissell's (2010)^[2] work is particularly relevant here because it demonstrates that public transport produces changing affective atmospheres rather than a single uniform emotional experience.

Theme 7: Mobile Phones and the Creation of Private Space

Mobile phones may create a temporary psychological boundary within a crowded public environment.

A passenger listening to music, watching a video, reading messages or talking on the phone can remain physically present while psychologically withdrawing from surrounding interaction. Research on Dutch trains found that mobile-phone use was one of the most frequently reported activities and could reduce direct interaction while simultaneously generating alternative forms of sociality and non-verbal communication.

This suggests that contemporary railway travel involves an interesting combination:

Physical proximity + Psychological distance.

Theme 8: Perception of Place Along the Journey

The Namkhana–Sealdah journey can also be interpreted as a sequence of changing perceptions of place. The passenger may experience differences in:

settlement density, agricultural landscape, markets, roadside commercial activity, housing, station architecture, passenger composition, traffic and urban infrastructure. The journey consequently becomes a form of **mobile visual experience**. Rather than experiencing South 24 Parganas as a single homogeneous geographical space, passengers may construct a series of psychologically meaningful places.

Theme 9: From Peripheral Space to Metropolitan Space

The movement towards Sealdah can symbolically represent a transition from relatively peripheral and rural environments towards metropolitan Kolkata. This should not be interpreted simply as a hierarchy between “backward” rural space and “advanced” urban space. Instead, the research can investigate how passengers themselves interpret the transition.

Different passengers may attach different meanings to the same landscape: Livelihood, home, opportunity, congestion, nostalgia, aspiration, insecurity and familiarity.

Thus, place perception is socially constructed and personally experienced.

Discussion

The proposed study conceptualises the railway journey as a moving social space. Four dimensions are particularly important. Physical Space: The carriage establishes the material conditions of interaction. Seats, doors, windows, luggage areas, standing spaces and passenger density influence behavioural possibilities. Social Space: Passengers continuously create social relationships through communication, cooperation, avoidance, familiarity and conflict. Psychological Space: Each passenger simultaneously constructs a private psychological space through attention, mobile-phone use, silence, imagination,

observation and selective interaction. Cultural Space: The railway brings together individuals with different occupations, social backgrounds, ages, gender identities, lifestyles and cultural practices. These four dimensions intersect to produce what may be termed a mobile socio-psychological environment. The theoretical interpretation is consistent with Lefebvre's (1991)^[7] argument that space is produced through social practices. It also extends Augé's (1995)^[1] notion of non-place by suggesting that even highly transient spaces can generate meaningful social experiences. The findings can further be interpreted through Goffman's (1963)^[5] concept of interaction order. Passengers do not simply occupy physical positions; they continuously monitor one another and regulate their own behaviour according to implicit expectations.

Theoretical Contribution

The study has the potential to make three contributions. First, it extends the concept of social space from stationary environments to a constantly moving environment. Second, it connects mobility studies with social psychology by examining how physical proximity influences interpersonal behaviour, perception and emotion. Third, it situates everyday railway travel within the socio-cultural context of South 24 Parganas, thereby providing a locally grounded account of mobility rather than relying exclusively on Western railway studies.

Research on Indian railways has also demonstrated historically that railway spaces have been socially contested and shaped by differences involving class, caste and religious affiliation. Mukhopadhyay's historical work further argues that railway infrastructure interacted with pre-existing social and spatial practices rather than creating social space from nothing. These insights make the contemporary Namkhana–Sealdah route particularly valuable for investigating how older social structures and contemporary mobility practices coexist.

Ethical Considerations

Because the research involves observation of people in public or semi-public transport spaces, ethical distinctions between public observation and identifiable personal data should be maintained. Particular care should be taken when interviewing minors, vulnerable passengers or individuals discussing potentially sensitive experiences.

Limitations

The proposed qualitative design has several limitations. First, findings from a relatively small purposive sample cannot be statistically generalised to all passengers using the Namkhana–Sealdah route. Second, passenger behaviour may differ according to time of day, weekday/weekend, season, festival period and crowd density. Third, the researcher's presence may influence interview responses or observed behaviour. Fourth, perceptions of place are subjective and may vary considerably among passengers. These limitations do not undermine the value of the study because the primary objective of qualitative research is to develop an in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences and social processes.

Conclusion

The Namkhana–Sealdah railway journey can be understood as considerably more than a movement between two

geographical locations. It constitutes a temporary, mobile and socially produced environment in which strangers encounter one another, negotiate personal space, communicate verbally and non-verbally, cooperate, withdraw, experience emotions and construct perceptions of the surrounding landscape. The train compartment represents a particularly rich setting for understanding everyday social psychology because it simultaneously contains anonymity and familiarity, privacy and proximity, individuality and collectivity, mobility and place attachment. Previous mobility research demonstrates that railway journeys generate complex social and emotional experiences rather than functioning merely as transportation from A to B. For South 24 Parganas, the Namkhana–Sealdah corridor also has broader significance because railway mobility connects peripheral and metropolitan spaces and facilitates everyday economic, educational and occupational movement. Parliamentary records have specifically recognised the importance of this railway connection for commuters in the region.

Accordingly, the railway journey may be conceptualised as a moving social laboratory in which everyday human behaviour becomes visible in a naturally occurring environment. A systematic ethnographic investigation of this journey could contribute to social psychology, mobility studies, railway sociology, cultural geography and the study of everyday life in Bengal.

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