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*SIDETRACKED:*  
GUJJAR AGITATION AND “TRAIN JAMMING” IN  
RAJASTHAN AS SPATIOTEMPORAL POLITICS

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**ABSTRACT**

In Rajasthan, India, the Gujjar often employ the tactic of blocking trains by sitting on the rail-ways. Termed here as “train jamming,” this piece discusses the ontological, spatio-temporal, and political positioning of this practice. The building of railways themselves ruptured lived spaces, implementing a state device to further distance economic classes and previously marginalized people. This article analyzes not only why the Gujjar sit on the train tracks, but how this interacts with the state and other cultural portrayals of train space-time. Utilizing this state-created space, the Gujjar in turn recreate its meaning and subvert the assumed purpose.

**Keywords** caste politics · space · spatiotemporal politics · India

**Introduction**

Which among the artifacts of modernity has so captured the imagination of nations as that “iron beast”, the railroad? Throughout its history, the railroad has been linked to the inexorable progress of modernity, technology, and the nation-state, reworking the lived experience of time and space, and the landscapes both material and symbolic of the societies which it has passed through. From its inception the railroad has figured as a kind of fabulous creature, of a second, or “produced” nature, initially accompanied by associations of both awe and terror, and has since spawned a thriving cultural industry with transnational appeal.<sup>1</sup> In Victorian London, the railroad conjured images of flight, sorcery, and the supernatural,<sup>2</sup> while in mid-nineteenth century America a cultural critic as suspicious of technology as Henry David Thoreau could write on the one hand of his conviction that “We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us”, while on the other expressing his unconcealed wonder at “this traveling demigod, this cloud-compeller... as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it”.<sup>3</sup> In India, where railway construction began as early as the 1850s under the British Raj, featuring in the accounts of such writers as Kipling, E.M. Forster,

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1. Michael J. Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*, Google-Books-ID: u3urDgAcyksC (Yale University Press, 1999).

2. *Ibid.*, 38-44.

3. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Yale University Press, 2006).

and Paul Scott,<sup>4</sup> railways were essential to the production of colonial, and later national, state space, as well as the project of establishing political, economic, and military domination.<sup>5</sup> The railways of India have since become a central feature of both the lived experience of people across India, whether as a means of transport or driver of land dispossession, as well as cultural representation in the forms of stamps, literature, art, train tourism, and cinema,<sup>6</sup> who, for instance, can forget the iconic ending of “Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge”, in which the main character, Simran, released from the grasp of her conservative father, runs after a train carrying her lover Raj, boarding the train in his arms and thus following her heart to become a modern Indian woman?<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1: Simran running after Raj. Classic.  
Source: Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. Film. 1995.

Central to this imagining, representation, and experiencing of trains is a particular mode of experiencing space and time – namely, from inside the train compartment, or alternately, on the train platform, in relation to the moving train. In either of these, train time is experienced as standardized, public time – indeed, train companies, not states, were the first to institute world time zones, that is, “railway time”;<sup>8</sup> for Simran, pursuing Raj, the train is something to be chased, perhaps outrun, but not something that slows down for the sake of an individual, no matter how true and pure her longing. Space, or “railway space”, from the perspective of a train journey, is also experienced in a characteristic way, with the difficulty of travel between certain locations shrunk, while locations along the route are experienced only through a carriage window<sup>9</sup>

To travel by train is thus to experience and move through space and time in a very particular way; this paper, however, attempts to think through what happens when this movement is interrupted – that is, when it is side-tracked, or de-railed – specifically by forms of politics that make use of the railroad in a way that disrupts the characteristic space-time of the railway. By looking at Gujjar agitation in Rajasthan India and their tactic of sitting on railway tracks to stop or redirect trains, a tactic I will call “train jamming”, and applying the work of Michel de Certeau on the experience of urban space, I attempt to analyze the tactic of railway jamming as a form of spatiotemporal politics that disrupts the “railway” space-time of the nation-state, exacerbating the unevenness of lived time and space; this form of politics in turn produces the railway track, a space typically unnoticed by (literally beneath the perception of) those riding a train, except in moments of disruption or breakdown, as itself an inhabited space and site of politics.

4. Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*.

5. Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, June 2004).

6. Arup Chatterjee, *The Purveyors of Destiny: A Cultural Biography of the Indian Railways* (Bloomsbury India, December 2018).

7. See figure 1

8. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918: With a New Preface*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, November 2003), 12-15.

9. Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*, 78-81.

## Gujjar Agitation and Caste Conflict

The Gujjars are a historically pastoral caste,<sup>10</sup> estimated to comprise over 10% of the population of Rajasthan,<sup>11</sup> a state in India of around 68 million people,<sup>12</sup> though precise numbers are uncertain since official census data on caste has not been collected by the government since the 1931 census. Under the 1950 Indian Constitution, Gujjars are classified among the Other Backward Castes (OBC), a classification that represents about half of the population of India,<sup>13</sup> and encompasses groups considered to have not been as disadvantaged historically as either the traditionally forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes (STs), or Scheduled Castes (SCs), previously known as “untouchables.” In 2008, however, thousands of Gujjars began to push for reclassification as a Scheduled Tribe – that is, at a lower point in the government classification system – in order to have better access to government jobs reserved for those in more historically marginalized groups. Under the leadership of Kirori Singh Bainsla, a former colonel in the Indian army, Gujjars blocked and damaged train tracks, destroyed police vehicles, and blocked off all entry points into New Delhi, leading to clashes with the police that left several dead.<sup>14</sup> Claiming that current government classifications disfavor them relative to groups such as the Meena, who have much better access to government jobs under current classifications, Gujjars sought a 5 percent reservation for government jobs within the legal limit of a 50% total quota for jobs. While the quota was eventually granted by the Rajasthan government, this decision was then struck down by the Rajasthan High Court, as it led to the state’s total quotas exceeding the legal limit of 50%; similar agitations in 2010 and 2015 resulted in a similar decision in 2015 that was struck down on similar grounds.<sup>15, 16</sup>

Gujjar agitation thus presents an interesting case for scholars working on the issue of caste in India, as an example of what has come to be termed the “creamy layer problem,” in which constitutional provisions providing measures for disfavored or marginalized groups allow groups of elites or those with relative advantage within these classifications to accrue a disproportionate amount of the advantages provided by government policies or aid packages. Providing an example of how this operates, Alpa Shah, in her work on forest politics among adivasis (forest-dwellers considered “indigenous” to the land) in the village of Tapu in Jharkhand, India, examines the ways in which issues of class intersect with activist discourses surrounding caste and indigeneity. Shah points out that the broad category “adivasis” used by government and activist workers subsumes both rural elites, who are descended from rural landowners, and the poorer descendants of former tenant farmers. These elites, wealthier and better educated than other adivasis, are able to present themselves as representatives of adivasis as a whole to activists and outsiders, and are thus better positioned so as to intercept the benefits accruing from projects of aid and development, while also reproducing their perspectives in the accounts and representations created by journalists, activists, and academics; in effect, argues Shah, “global discourses of indigeneity can maintain a class system that further marginalizes the poorest people”.<sup>17</sup> Gujjar agitation can similarly be read as a case in which a non-stigmatized group attempts to take advantage of provisions aimed at providing aid to marginalized groups. Others have considered the shortcomings of approaching Gujjar agitation through this lens, however: Megan Moodie points out that we cannot suppose, especially in the context of a shrinking state, that previously favored groups such as the Gujjars do not face the very real possibility of downward social and economic mobility, while elites within groups can furthermore provide important voices of support for their groups as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

Other scholars have focused on the ways in which the pursuit of ST status leads castes to “perform” backwardness, in turn perpetuating and solidifying colonial categories of caste in the process of seeking government recognition as “tribes.” Under the classificatory criteria established by the 1965 Lokur Committee, Scheduled Tribes are required to display: “(a) indication of primitive traits, (b) distinctive culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large, and (e) backwardness”.<sup>19</sup> Townsend Middleton, studying a team of anthropologists working for the government of West Bengal sent in 2006 to verify “tribal” traits among ten groups

10. Rama Lakshmi, “Indian Protesters Let Dead Decay,” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, June 1, 2008,

11. Randeep Ramesh, “Rajasthan hit by riots over caste system,” *The Guardian*, May 2007, chap. World news.

12. Census Organization of India, *Rajasthan Population 2011-2018 Census*.

13. Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Rise of the Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 1 (2000): 86.

14. Lakshmi, “Indian Protesters Let Dead Decay.”

15. Asian News International, “Led by Col. Kirori Singh Bainsla, Gujjars block Rail Route in Rajasthan for Quota in Govt Jobs,” *Biharprabha News*, 2015,

16. Zee News, “Rajasthan: Gujjar community back under OBC category,” *Zee News*, May 2017,

17. Alpa Shah, *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Duke University Press Books, July 2010), 32.

18. Megan Moodie, “Upward mobility in a forgotten tribe: Notes on the “creamy layer” problem,” *Focaal; Brooklyn* 2013, no. 65 (2013): 23–32.

19. Townsend Middleton, “Scheduling tribes: A view from inside India’s ethnographic state,” *Focaal - European Journal of Anthropology*, no. 65 (2013): 13–22.

seeking ST status, observes that ethnic associations chose their most isolated locations for study, instructing locals to perform “primitive” or “savage” traits, including “rites of spirit possession, exorcism, and blood-drinking”, while also hiding any evidence of modernization or Hindu influence.<sup>20</sup> OBC pursuit of ST status thus raises questions about the relationship of legal and technical classificatory mechanisms to the perpetuation of colonial categories and the politics of tribal recognition, while also calling into question the teleology and state project presumed by classifications such as “Other Backward Caste,” in light of fears of downward social and economic mobility.<sup>21</sup>

Applying this existing caste-based lens to Gujjar agitation thus provides a great deal of insight into the political, social, and economic motivations of some groups seeking ST status; however, this approach seems to face several shortcomings when we attempt to consider the specific tactics, such as train-jamming, utilized, and the specific form the politics takes in this context. Michael Levien, writing on struggles over land dispossession in several locations across India, argues convincingly that conflicts over land dispossession can come to create their own distinctive forms of politics. Land dispossession, argues Levien, presents a transparent, irreversible, and existential threat to those who use the land for sustenance, and thus tends to create ad-hoc, temporary, locally situated coalitions against the state that cross existing political divisions, utilizing various spatial, physical, legal, and political strategies to overtly obstruct the progress of attempts at dispossession, rather than more “everyday” means of politics.<sup>22</sup> Levien’s work thus points us to consider the specific forms and tactics used by social movements as themselves significant, perhaps particular to, derived from, or selected in light of the specific issues, actors, and stakes of a conflict. Train jamming, as a tactic, does not resemble a “performance of backwardness,” in the sense that it is not an attempt to fit into or meet the criteria the state provides for classification as a scheduled tribe. The tactic instead eschews the established technical-scientific mechanisms provided by the state in favor of an overtly agonistic positioning against the state, demanding classification as a scheduled tribe explicitly for the sake of the benefits that come along with the classification. Furthermore, Gujjar agitation seems to shed any pretense of addressing itself to existing means of appeal provided by the state altogether. Train jamming is not addressed to a democratic polity as a means of eliciting sympathy or garnering electoral support; rather, it seems again to run directly counter to the purpose of garnering wider popular support. Demands are made instead by directly obstructing state infrastructure; train jamming takes the state’s ability to operate hostage. Thus, while a caste-based approach offers insight into the overall constitution of the actors involved and their interests, it contributes less to understanding the function and utility of the tactics used in Gujjar agitation. I argue that to understand train jamming we need to examine this case as a form of spatiotemporal politics that disrupts the state’s existing spatiotemporal regime, exacerbating the unevenness of lived time and space, in order to understand the specific utility and appeal of train jamming as a form of political action.

## Space, Time, and the Railway

Anthropological engagements with the question of space, following from the work of theorists as varied as Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty, recognize that space, rather than being a neutral backdrop for action, is itself a product of social relationships, always experienced and encountered through embodied social practice, and that these relationships in turn presuppose and require embodied space.<sup>23</sup> Manu Goswami, in discussing colonial and national projects of space production in India, writes that the railways formed “visible, material embodiments of its [the colonial state’s] authority and ‘civilizing’ modernity”<sup>24</sup> that would “domesticate, discipline, and modernize a barbarous population, tame its prejudices, and elicit its loyalty”.<sup>25</sup> Functioning as more than simply signs of state domination and modernization, however, the railways were an integral part of the project of creating “a vast, spatially integrated transportation system fixed within a geographical space”,<sup>26</sup> the means by which India would become opened as a market for British goods, and previously inaccessible sources of labor could become integrated into the imperial economy.<sup>27</sup> Along with telegraph lines linking major urban centers, irrigation projects, and other infrastructural projects, railways – the production of which was enabled by the state’s use of eminent domain – created a new “uneven economic geography,” cutting across existing routes of trade and production while producing India as a source of raw materials and a market for industrial manufactured goods.<sup>28</sup> In effect, railways both “homogenized

20. Middleton, “Scheduling tribes.”

21. See also Jaffrelot, “The Rise of the Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt” for more on OBC politics

22. Michael Levien, “The Politics of Dispossession: Theorizing India’s “Land Wars,”” *Politics & Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 351–394.

23. Setha M. Low, “Towards an anthropological theory of space and place,” *Semiotica* 2009, no. 175 (2009): 21–37.

24. Goswami, *Producing India*, 46.

25. *Ibid.*, 47.

26. *Ibid.*, 48.

27. *Ibid.*, 48–49.

28. *Ibid.*, 59–62.

and differentiated” space, enabling the creation of imperial state space while also facilitating military and political control.<sup>29</sup>

From its inception, railways were thus integral to the production of India as both a nation and an economy, creating new geographies and spatial relationships; what, then, to make of Gujjar train jamming, a tactic directly engaged at the site of these spatial relationships, but making use of them in a very different way? As I have suggested above, railway “space-time” is experienced typically through the site of the train and train carriage itself, or the train platform: again, a brief look at Indian cinema and culture industry surrounding trains reveals how deeply these are rendered as sites of anticipation, conflict, encounter, and fantasy.<sup>30</sup> Gujjar agitation, on the other hand, engages politically at the train track, a site typically lying outside of, or beneath the perception of train riders, except in moments of breakdown or delay. In doing so, Gujjar agitation produces a new space of conflict, encounter, and habitation.<sup>31</sup>

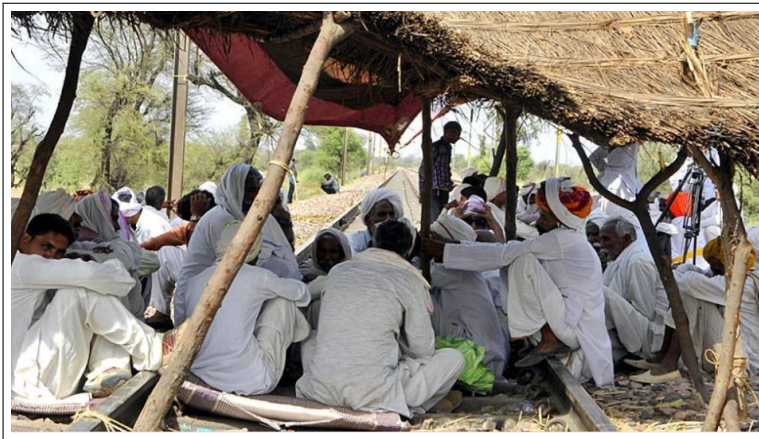


Figure 2: The train track as dwelling.

Source: Hindustan Times, “Govt all set to give 1% quota to Gujjar, 4 other communities in Rajasthan,” *Hindustan Times*, December 2017,

To understand this mode of engaging with the railroad track, we can usefully draw on the work of Michel de Certeau on the experience of urban space, specifically on what he terms “tactics of consumption.” De Certeau examines the activity of the individual experiencing subject, or “user”, and how it makes use of, or engages in “ways of operating” in everyday life that involve recombining existing cultural productions in accord with their own interests, but essentially, also – necessarily – in accord with “their own rules”.<sup>32</sup> For de Certeau, these “tactics of consumption,” or processes of “making do,” are inherently “poetic” or creative:<sup>33</sup> de Certeau conceives of this process as a form of “poaching”,<sup>34</sup> in which individuals take existing cultural elements and through their own “procedures of ‘consumption’”<sup>35</sup> – that is, through the forms of the ways in which people make use of these elements – necessarily appropriate existing elements into a shape (“trajectory,” “sentence,” or “narrativization”) that takes on meaning beyond that contained in the individual elements themselves, just as a sentence, in circumstance, meaning, use and context goes beyond the meanings we might attempt fix on the individual words,<sup>36</sup> even given “established vocabulary and syntax”.<sup>37</sup>

To elucidate what has been presented in this fairly abstract discussion, let us turn to de Certeau’s discussion of walking in the city as a form of language. When someone takes a walk, writes de Certeau, their footsteps trace out a narrative: they “weave places together” the way speech weaves together words. Nonetheless, to simply describe

29. Goswami, *Producing India*, 42-72.

30. Chatterjee, *The Purveyors of Destiny*, 186-220.

31. See figure 2

32. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Third edition, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, December 2011), xv-xiv.

33. *Ibid.*, xv.

34. *Ibid.*, xii.

35. *Ibid.*, xiii.

36. *Ibid.*, xviii.

37. *Ibid.*, xiii.

these journeys as “paths” or “trajectories”<sup>38</sup> on a map is to miss the ways in which the act of walking, as a telling or narrativization, is engaged in the resignification of “proper names”, as through the experience of walking, individuals bring new associations, meanings, and significations to places, directions, and locations, the names of which “become liberated spaces which can be occupied. . . articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of literal, forbidden or permitted meaning”.<sup>39</sup> In this way, to return to an earlier metaphor, not only do the sentences we form take on meaning beyond that of their constitutive elements, but the process of sentence-forming (taking a walk, telling a story) itself alters the meaning of these individual terms, names, or elements, hollowing them out and rendering them habitable, “like a rented apartment”.<sup>40</sup>

De Certeau’s discussion allows us to understand Gujjar agitation as precisely such a “tactic of consumption.” While Gujjar agitation does not “produce” space, in the sense of building new material structures, it makes new use out of the existing material and space of the train track; while these Gujjars aren’t engaged in “consumption” in the sense of purchasing goods or political influence, they are engaged in the “poaching” of existing material infrastructure, inhabiting the space of the railroad track in a way that “re-reads” the space of the train track in a way that runs counter to the typical use made of it as simply part of what allows the train to run, reconfiguring it as a site of habitation and protest. While de Certeau focuses largely on activities that are “traceless” and without obvious political consequence, such as reading a novel or cooking, it is not difficult to recognize Gujjar agitation as a form of politics enabled by the very sort of processes of narrative-making and re-symbolization that de Certeau outlines, producing “liberated spaces” articulated upon “literal. . . permitted meaning”.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, given that we not only subjects engaged in processes of narrativizing and interpreting the world, but also acting subjects that by necessity take action upon it, we can fruitfully extend de Certeau’s insights to recognize Gujjar train jamming as a practice of material, embodied spatial politics that produces new spaces of politics and reconfigures the existing spatiotemporal regime of the state as a political tool. If, as Goswami argues, the space-time of the railway is not just a neutral feature of life, but an active facilitator, producer, and enabler of social, political, and economic relationships, various forms of coordination and control, as well as an ever-present sign of government dominance, the tactic of train jamming can be recognized as a form of politics that utilizes and disrupts these very relationships that normally form the fabric of everyday life. By diverting, delaying, and stopping trains – and thus disrupting standardized, public “railway time” – Gujjar agitation exacerbates the unevenness of lived time and space. In doing so, Gujjar agitation reconfigures the ways people experience their relationship to the space-time of the state, unveiling uncertainty and contingency underneath the homogenizing and standardizing effects of railway time and space, and calling into question the existing spatiotemporal regime of the state.<sup>42</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

It is easy to consider politics as an abstract, agonistic field on which parties negotiate competing interests, against the backdrop of a neutral and inert world. Anthropological engagements with space and time, however, enable us to see space and time as social products, as well as facilitators, tools, and the means by which politics and social relationships can take place. Gujjar agitation disrupts an existing spatiotemporal regime, re-interpreting the possibilities presented by the space of the railway track, in turn producing a new site of politics and altering the lived experience of railway space and time for those who ride the train. In doing so, Gujjar agitation eschews existing forms of appeal taking place through institutionalized state procedures and institutions such as electoral politics, making demands for an electoral minority by directly contesting the state’s ability to maintain and facilitate spatial and temporal relationships that previously constituted the assumed fabric of everyday life. In this paper, I have attempted to examine the particularities, function, and utility of the tactic of train jamming as a form of spatiotemporal politics, in the process outlining a process by which the subjective processes of narrativization and “tactics of consumption” presented in the work of Michel de Certeau come to serve as the basis and prerequisite for material political action, informing studies of caste politics through a look at how such encounters take place through the means of the fabric of the perception, and the lived experience of space and time.

38. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

39. *Ibid.*, 103-105.

40. *Ibid.*, xxi.

41. *Ibid.*, 103-105.

42. See figure 3

GUJAR AGITATION - THE FOLLOWING TRAINS WILL BE DIVERTED / TERMINATED:							
FULLY CANCELLED TRAINS							
S.No.	TRAIN No.	From	From (Station)	To	To (Station)	Starting Date	Remarks
1	09807	KOTA	KOTA	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	21.05.15	CANCELLED
2	12059	KOTA	KOTA	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	21.05.15	CANCELLED
3	09807	KOTA	KOTA	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	22.05.15	CANCELLED
4	22913	BCT	MUMBAI CENTRAL	NDLS	NEW DELHI	22.05.15	CANCELLED
5	12247	BDTS	BANDRA TERMINUS	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	22.05.15	CANCELLED
6	12917	ADI	AHMEDABAD	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	22.05.15	CANCELLED
7	19019	BDTS	BANDRA TERMINUS	DDN	DEHRADOON	23.05.15	CANCELLED
8	29019	MDS	MANDASOR	KTT	KOTA	23.05.15	CANCELLED
UP TRAINS							
S.No.	T.No.	FROM	TO	STARTING DATE	REMARKS		
1	12060	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	KOTA	KOTA	22.05.15	CANCELLED
2	09808	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	KOTA	KOTA	22.05.15	CANCELLED
3	29020	KOTA	KOTA	MDS	MANDASOR	22.05.15	CANCELLED
DIVERTED TRAINS							
DN TRAINS							
S.No.	T.No.	FROM	TO	STARTING DATE	REMARKS		
1	19019	BDTS	BANDRA TERMINUS	DDN	DEHRADOON	20.05.15	DIV VIA KOTA-GUNA-BINA-JHS (KOTA-GUNA-BINA-JHANSI)
2	12415	IND	INDORE	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	21.05.15	DIV VIA UIN-MKC-NSZ-JHS-AGC-MTI (UJAIN-MAKSI-NISHATPURA-JHANSI-AGRA-MATHURA)
3	12471	BDTS	BANDRA TERMINUS	JAT	JAMMU TAWI	21.05.15	DIV VIA NAD-NSZ-JHS-AGC-MTI (NAGDA-NISHATPURA-JHANSI-AGRA-MATHURA)
4	22655	TVC	TRIVENDRAM CENTRAL	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	20.05.15	VIA NAD-NSZ-JHS-AGC-MTI (NAGDA-NISHATPURA-JHANSI-AGRA-MATHURA)
5	12964	LDZ	LUDAPUR	NZM	NIZAMUDDIN	21.05.15	VIA AII-H.RE (AJMER-FULERA-REWARI)
6	19019	BDTS	BANDRA TERMINUS	DDN	DEHRADOON	21.05.15	DIV VIA KOTA-GUNA-BINA-JHS (KOTA-GUNA-BINA-JHANSI)

Figure 3: News sites announcing canceled and diverted trains. The list goes on for several pages. Source: New Delhi Television, "List of Trains Affected Due to Gujjar Agitation in Rajasthan," *NDTV.com*

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