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## India Lives in a Railway Compartment

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Travelling in Indian railways was a difficult proposition. What was even more painful was to travel in a general compartment. Hell broke loose on the earth when we couldn't make a night of it. The turn and twist of the fate had a tame end to an otherwise memorable journey which had bred evil omen since when it was planned, well in advance, before four months. To start with, tickets were cancelled due to some miscalculations of the holiday schedule. The real twist to the story came when the rescheduled journey tickets were not confirmed. To add to the agony, the final chart was not prepared, the IRTC information missed out the confirmation list even one day after the actual journey date. But the solace to the entire episode came when "Tatkal" tickets were confirmed. It was another matter that the narrator had to part with heavy amount of money in the form of both the government and private commission.

The other week I had got a rare opportunity to visit to South India, time off from busy schedule of routine life which many of us do-gooders followed to keep us fresh for new assignments in both personal life and public place where we worked to live an earning. I got a chance to visit Southern part of India, mainly temples and places of historical importance, which had opened up a can of warms from the beginning. Though it was not the best bet of the sorts, I made a strenuous but fruitful tour on a holiday trip. A kind of strange feeling and excitement greeted us on the first day of the tour. Fear writ large on our face, depicting us as demented souls, badly in need of some moral support to stay on course for the future course of action; to last till the end of the journey.

To travel to a far off place, especially when we were not in a group, amounts to a lot of risk, of both life and respect. Away from home with one family, where opposition was stiff from all sides, fixed accountability on the head of the group for every odd thing that came in their way. An unknown fear had emerged from somewhere and the snowballing consequences that followed had called upon me to cater to the uncomfortable lot accompanying me; setting their records straight to stand up for their self defense against me when they needed it badly. The beginning was grand. Everything was normal and up to our expectation; travelling had its own inconveniences to deal with, caution and care being the catch-all words, until that inauspicious night had its share on our life. But its pros and cons had its positive impact on our life too. Perhaps we were waiting for this day to realize one important lesson of our life. Someone said, "They can betray me but/ I choose not to betray/ my peace of mind". In the same token we were part of pain and agony to know where the real "peace of mind" lied. Ecstasy comes through agony.

To end up the serious note of the atmosphere, I caught up with some jokes involving my daughter and son; my better-half being a woman of serious look could hardly digest such jokes, defying her apparent seriousness. Being the only male member, for in India the male member was privileged for one thing or other over their female counterparts, I tried to ward off an unknown fear from the faces of my children and wife.

After saying a few words in praise of our success story of traveling the southern part of India, I tried hard to make them at home with the strange things that surrounded and clouded our journey eventually. “please” my wife uttered, with usual annoyance clearly reflected on her face, still wandering what went wrong with her husband in getting a reserved ticket. After a few minutes of silence I spoke again,

“Isn’t it comfortable?”

“I don’t like jokes”, she retorted angrily. To ease things up, I added,

“we get a glimpse of the Real India inside a railway compartment”.

“Why we are always being put to taste for such a view of mini India?”, her complaining voice became prominent this time. I couldn’t afford to displease her as heated exchanges would soon flow from her mouth putting me and other fellow passengers on a spot of bother. So I kept silent without any involvement in argument by analogy.

Before we could discuss anything further, the berth was over crowded within minutes; each passenger was busy finding a standing space for himself or herself. I thanked God, at least we have got place with the comfort of sitting. The clock had struck only 4.30 pm, still one full hour left for the train to commence journey from the source station. The seats were loaded beyond their actual capacity. The space for luggage had been occupied by the passengers. Not being well versed with the local language proved to be my forte since no one came to approach me for adjusting one or two passengers in the berth occupied by us. But my moments of exultation were only short lived when a fat man with an old woman and child came to me for sparing some space for his old mother. They turned a deaf ear to my repeated requests that there was hardly any space for the old woman to sit owing to her obesity. After several arguments, I gave in to adjust the child as the seat had already been occupied by four grown- up passengers. But the man insisted on adjusting his old mother. He pleaded with his usual fortitude and undisturbed peace of mind that a general compartment was the only saving grace for them. They could ill afford to such comfort and economy, the financial constraint had driven these people to the general compartment. Of course, it was a decision of no choice for me, being a victim of the man made scarcity of the seats in the reserved compartment.

I couldn’t but plead for my inability to adjust to share my seat with the old woman, although deep within I had developed a soft corner for the old lady. Again the arduous task of twelve hours night journey in a general compartment had taken its toll on my mind before I could become generous for the lady concerned. The struggle for survival was the key contest here. The periphery had threatened the very existence of the centre. They defied all my logic,

which defended my inability to part with the position of advantage. I was stubborn on my stand as to what compelled me to cling to my seat. The reason that I started from the source station and would end up my journey with the destination station could hardly please my detractors, their only concern being adjustment of the old lady as their immediate requirement, as they also had to travel a long distance. They seemed to argue with the assurance that by simply coming to the compartment one hour early, would not allow us to the exclusive possession of the berth.

After each station the compartment was swelled up with passengers like flood water in the river which put extra pressure on me to give some space to the pleading passengers. The stubborn lot wouldn't allow me to stick to my stand point of not letting an inch of space, although the signs of defeat from within were clear in the form of profuse sweating that was discernible in my face. The steel rods on the top of the berth meant for luggage had been overcrowded by passengers causing us further discomfort as dust spilling from their shoes fell off constantly on our head. My arrogance of firm possession of seats had soon faded as the passengers over our head posed imminent threat to our exclusive belongingness.

However, the other passengers were quite comfortable with what they had got on that crowded compartment. Back to basics seemed to be their slogan. Not for a single moment they seemed to be either confused or disturbed. The remarkable ease with which some of the passengers went under the open space of the seats, the space meant for luggage, had left me with no clue to understand the secret of their comfort zone. First came a middle aged woman who had comfortably placed her entire body under the seat without any signs of twist or turn or a stiff muscle. But when the second man went under the seat, he was soundly built and his body spread well beyond what the entire berth could actually accommodate, I was a bit surprised seeing their sense of adjustment. The point of suffocation and intolerance, which was unbearable for us, had no signs of worry in their unperturbed faces. The fact that they had worn white dhoties and white shirts didn't even put them under stress considering the fact that they would come into close contact with the large amount of dust which had gathered force inside the seats. Our impatience met a new height when some seemingly well-to-do young men had fallen into the line of the fellow passengers in choosing the empty space under the seats for a good night's sleep. Our spurious sense of superiority was soon exposed. The concept of smart city, providing the passengers with comfort and luxury seemed to me as hallow. The hike of railway tariff even eluded my simple mind. The talk of reaching out to the masses was missing the real sense of the upliftment of the masses. One had to travel in a general compartment to know and discover the real India.

The whole night was replete with such actions which would be no less than any chapter of a detective story. I took it for certain that our initial sense of composure was left to bite the dust. We became jealous of their dwelling in comparison to our sense of insecurity. For us it was like a night of house arrest where even attending call of nature became difficult. We were virtually confined to our seats like unmovable statues in an important festival. Time crawled into space. Hours appeared like years. Twelve hours meant twelve years, no less than an epoch. The hustle and bustle of the passengers throughout the night had proved one thing for us that India lives in a railway compartment. Brooding over such thoughts I spent some

time. I came here to discover myself in this compartment. Without this bit knowledge my life would have been incomplete. I came to realize that day the truth of the saying, “knowledge comes through experience”. The whistle of the train retorted in my ears, echoing the words “India lives in a railway compartment”.