

GOD'S LEG

I was in *Surat* trying to catch a train to return home. *Surat* is an old historical city, like *Kanchi*, *Madurai*, *Kashi*, *Gaya* and *Vataapi*. Since antiquity the *zari* border design of *Kanchi* has been widely used in *Surat*.

We know cities that are famous for their products: *Eurode* for towels; *Bhavani* and *Karur* for blankets; *Palliyadi* for *dhotis* and *toor dal*; *Kanchipuram*, *Arani*, *Dharmavaram*, *Tiruppuvanam*, and *Poachampall* for silk; *Bivandi* for shirts and trousers; *Tiruppur* for *banians* and undergarments; *Malegoan* for female garments, and *Calcutta* for cotton sarees. *Surat* is renowned for its synthetic fabrics.

Merchants are constantly on the move in *Surat* - throughout the day, seven days a week. Traders from cities all over the country arrive, buy clothes wholesale, arrange for their shipment to their destinations, and then return home with no trouble. Public houses, *choultrys* and rest houses dotting the city provide accommodation and safety for the visitors' cash and possessions.

Surat is a city that never sleeps. Once you overcome your infatuation for *idli*, *dosa* and tamarind soup and get accustomed to *roti*, *dhokla*, *baapdi*, *shira* and *lassi*, you have signed up for an all-consuming feast. It takes the tongue only a little time to savor and get addicted to new tastes. Besides milk, curds and sweets are also available in plenty. No other city grants you the same joy and happiness once you are hooked on to *Gujarati* dishes. The only drawback, one might say, is that *Gujarat* is a dry state.

No city of antiquity has ever escaped the onslaught of old age: dimpled cheeks, shaky teeth; gray hair; muscles seemingly disjointed from bones; infirmity and disease. The city reeks with pollution and traffic congestion; cows and pigs freely roam the streets; sackcloth and polythene sheets cover the roofs of cottages that line the streets; bullock carts, lorries, streetwalkers, pimps, and pickpockets clog the streets while residents – men and women - go on their usual, daily routines: lolling on coir cots, cooking, and bathing on pavements, fighting and wooing one another.

The cold winter chills the bones while the summer heat leaves a prickling sensation; the entire state was trying to catch its breath while politicians were busy making longwinded speeches.

My professional duties centered mostly in a small town called *Navsari*. It had only a population of one lakh but was a home to foundries, factories and textile mills. *Navsari* is three

hundred and thirty meters from *Mumbai* but only thirty meters from *Surat*. Not all the passenger trains stop in *Navsari*, but every train does in *Surat*. If you begin your journey say, by the express train from *Mumbai*, you would travel through *Vasai, Wappi, Valsad, Billimora, and Navsari* and make *Surat* your final destination; so, your return journey must begin in *Surat* which has a large and shabby railway station.

Every sales representative – depending on his personal whim and fancy - spends his daytime in legwork and the nights in revelry and get-together parties. While *Gujarat* has been, officially, a dry state for many years, you can still get liquor on demand – if you approach certain ‘right’ sources: ask, and you will be granted; seek, and you will find it; knock on a door, and it would be open to you. Whatever might be the ruling party at the state level, it has enough cronies running the establishments where the prohibited goods would be easily available, albeit, at higher prices. After all, doesn’t democracy begin with self-service?

Now, *Damon* is very close to *Wappi* just as *Una* is to *Dui*. *Goa* is an island in the Arabian Ocean; *Diu* and *Damon* are parts of *Combat Bay*. *Daman* and *Diu* are, by land, separated by six hundred kilometers and, by sea, they are apart by one thousand and six hundred kilometers reached by circumnavigation of the *Mannaar Bay*. In other words, you will have to begin the voyage in Bay of Bengal, travel through Indian Ocean and reach the Arabian Ocean. There’s Prohibition, still you are allowed to carry two or three pegs of whiskey from *Goa* in the Arabian Ocean and travel across six hundred kilometers to *Damon* because they are the former Portuguese colonies; there is a similar haven in the South – from *Mayyazhi* to *Pondicherry*, a former French colony.

First, you are given a permit in fading gray color torn from a government register; these are duly signed and authenticated with an official stamp and are sold in liquor stores, state-wide. You pay only five rupees, and then fill in your name and other details. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. The law may be squint-eyed, but loopholes have numerous eyes. We live in a country that breathes life through hordes of loopholes.

You have probably heard of Mahatma Gandhiji’s *Salt Satyagraha*; one of my friends translated it as the *Fight of Salt Producers* and, when I said it distorted the significance of the movement, he turned into my life-long enemy. Later, he corrected it as *The Righteous War for Salt*. Gandhi’s Salt March was headed toward *Dandi*; we still have problem finding out *Vedaranyam* on our maps.

Dandi lies twenty kilometers from *Navsari*. The guidebooks describe its surroundings, their historic significance and artistic traditions. For example, if you look into a guidebook for *Mamallapuram*, you may note that it can be reached by travel, by road, after so many kilometers; similarly, you will know *Dandi* lies three hundred kilometers from *Ahmadabad*. But why should a tourist from *Chennai* travel all the way to *Ahmadabad* and, then, drop down to *Dandi*? He might as well take a train or plane to *Surat* and *Dandi* would be only fifty kilometers away. Where's the need for somebody in a third tier to descend to the seventh?

Dandi has small seashore; that's how, over the years; I had become acquainted with temples, forts, seashores, rivers and mountains.

There's an afternoon train from *Surat* to *Panvel* at four. I have a younger brother living in *Panvel*. I had planned to reach *Panvel* at ten that night, spend one day with him, and then resume my journey to *Mumbai*.

Now, the train journey from *Ahmadabad* to *Mumbai* was always marked by overcrowding and congestion. I was unable to get railway reservation – for any day, at any time, on any train – plying between *Surat* and *Panvel*; it had never been my practice to make reservations while planning return trips. I would simply travel with the ticket in hand and face the consequences.

It's the rainy season; there's constant downpour; dampness swept the entire platform while dribbles of water fell everywhere on goods and men; flies swarmed over the passengers.

It had been only a few months since *Surat* had recovered from plague.

The train arrived on time and I, ignoring the raindrops and flies, plunged straight into a sleeper compartment facing me; I had my usual small suitcase and a shoulder-bag with me. After stowing away my belongings, I sat down leisurely, stretched my legs and got rid of the footwear when I was greeted by the aroma of *masala vada*. Soon, the ticket collector arrived and, after I politely presented my credentials, he left me saying, “*Aur kya, bait jav.*”

The train journey was to last six hours, but I didn't bring any book to read during the travel. I savored the joy of my safe haven and freedom from the rain outside and its hassles; again, this was an express train and it would stop only at *Valsad*, *Vasai*, *Bhivandi* and *Panvel*.

Soon a beggar showed up humming what I thought was a film song by Mukesh. He seemed forty years old and had recently cropped his hair, but sported no beard. I sensed vigor in his agile body that had grown tall and mature like a sugar cane; he had no leg below his right thigh and

had also lost the left arm below the wrist. He carried crutches below the armpits. Now and then, he stopped singing and begged in *Gujarati*, a language not quite amenable to begging.

With one leg gone, the other was strong and healthy; so was his right hand, and the whole body seemed to function normal. I wondered why he had become a beggar instead of trying out a simple trade or occupation. There was a touch of grace on his face - the dignity of labor – a distinct characteristic of the working class people from the Kutch area.

Still, why beg? Of course, everyone has his own reason; I couldn't explain my action to you, neither would the beggar concur in with yours. Not only is every human face different, the myriad thoughts of every human being are all unlike. How funny! I was just pondering whether to offer just four annas to a beggar, but so many thoughts and questions of proper conduct and violation of human rights were crowding my mind.

The train was still in motion: at this rate, I hoped the train would sprint through *Goa*, *Kallikottai*, and soon cover the vast distance that separated me from my hometown in *Kanyakumari*! Life's always full of wishful thinking!

I noticed the beggar making his way through the vestibule from one compartment to another with the crutches screeching, now and then, and coming to a halt. He turned a pleasant face every time whatever the response from those he was patronizing; no ill feeling or a look of disappointment. The train was running late under the bad weather; it would be close to eleven when it reached *Panvel*. The catering service was operating in full swing.

The menu included shrunken, oily *pooris*, some rice, potato- pea's curry, *dal* and a pickle – all for thirty rupees.

After dinner, the passengers were getting ready to make their beds and lie down. The one-legged beggar must have realized his place would be soon invaded by other travelers boarding the train at next stop. Once all the passengers had slid their beds down, I found only enough space to sit down cringing and shrinking until the next stop. I dismissed any idea of my resting for the next hour and half. The chill from the rain storm hung in the air. I walked up to the end of the compartment that opened to a pantry car. I wanted to stand there awhile and it was then that I noticed the one-legged beggar leaning against a wall.

“Not yet gone to sleep?” he asked me.

“I am getting off at *Panvel*.”

“It would be close to eleven thirty,” he said. “I am also getting off at *Panvel*.”

I wondered why a beggar would follow a schedule for getting on and off his beat from a train. He now stood up with some effort and stared at the pantry entrance. A Malayali waiter recognized him, came out and offered him a tray with rice, dal and *sabji*.

The beggar leaned against the wall, held the tray under the left elbow and began eating.

“I usually get my *raatkaa khanaa* when I travel on this train at night,” he said.

He finished eating, washed the tray and returned it to the waiter.

“Why do you want to get off at *Panvel*?” I wanted to know.

“My beat is always between *Surat* and *Panvel*,” he replied with a laugh. “The *Rajkot* (express) comes in the morning; I will take it and reach *Surat* by afternoon. The next day, again, I take this same train . . . I will make close to five hundred rupees and hand over the money to my family. . I have two sons. . *Kya karega?*”

“What happened to your leg?”

“Back home I owned a *paan* shop,” he said, and continued. “They burnt down my shop, my home. I also lost my leg and arm; What can we do? Everything happens according to God’s will.”

“And nobody did anything about it?”

“What can anybody do? It doesn’t make a difference whether you’re a Hindu or a Moslem. One should never be poor . . .”

“Can you spend the night on the *Panvel* platform?”

“I can, but someone would steal even from a beggar . . . I may even get beaten and cursed . . . You can’t trust anybody!”

“Where else can you go?”

“I will go to *Panvel S.T. Stand*; there I have a friend from my hometown who owns a tea shop. It is always open for business. I will simply hand over my stuff to him and sleep in a corner. The next morning I will catch my train.”

“Can you walk – up and down?”

“*Aur kya karega? Uparvale kaa meharbaani . . .*”

He began sorting out his daily collections: little notebooks; small coins and change; a blanket in a shoulder bag; a water bottle and an aluminum tumbler.

I gave him ten rupees. He accepted it with a hearty smile when I noticed his sparkling teeth.

We were nearing the *Panvel* station. He too got up to leave when I, again, noticed his leg.

“*Sap*, Forget about my leg,” he said laughing, “I only wish nobody cuts off God’s legs.”

God smiles when the poor smile, we are told. If that were true, the poor too can survive with God’s legs.

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