

## RATS IN MAZES

The Republic of India has twenty-eight states, and six United Territories besides the National Capital, New Delhi. Presently there are strong demands floating around that *Telangana* be taken apart from the State of Andhra Pradesh and *Vidharba, Konkan, and Marathwada* from the State of Maharashtra. A few years ago there were whispers that Tamil Nadu be split into two; quite a few panicked at the news and jumped as if their loin clothes were set on fire.

Probably you don't remember Subrahmanya Swamy, a former Member of Parliament for over twenty years, recommending that the island nation Sri Lanka be merged with Tamil Nadu. Yet, many of you might easily recall the details and encyclopedic facts about Manorama Aachi, the star of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam movies: how many of her movies were made in color, how many in black-white, and how many produced but never released, etc.

Uttar Pradesh, after division, gave rise to Uttaranchal; Bihar led to Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh to Chhattisgarh. Raipur became the state capital. Presently there is no border between the states of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. The more borders in a republic, the more problems it will have to endure.

At the border of Chhattisgarh, in the eastern part of the state of Maharashtra, lies the Gadchiroli District. Like its neighbors Nagpur and Chandrapur, Gadchiroli has tropical wet and dry climate with dry conditions prevailing most of the year. The district included small towns from which a few - five or six at first - began a trek to South. It was no invasion by any means: they were not following in the steps of Kanaka Vijayan who, legend has, carried stones on his back to erect a monument to Kannagi. Neither was it an attempt to have sand from Kanyakumari carried on the backs of the heirs of ancient Chola, Chera and Pandya kings to erect a temple for Sant Tukaram. Even if that were true, how could one recognize the progeny of those ancient kings?

They travelled in groups of five, ten or fifteen. Its members - past in their sixties and seventies - included couples, their parents, grandparents, uncles or an aunts. Their pilgrimage took them to Balaji's Temple in Tirupati, Nityakanya Bhagavati in Kanyakumari, Meenakshi in Madurai and Ramalingam in Rameswaram- each visit culminating in a *darshan* followed by a ritual bath.

The rail fare alone, for each passenger, came to five-hundred rupees; food had to be paid extra. Accommodation was to be had on the empty railway platforms; one could bathe

depending upon the availability of water. To attend the nature's call, they needed to walk far along the rail tracks; men and women walked in opposite directions. The calls for nature were infrequent because the members were in their golden years and also fasted on most of the days. Sometimes the passenger trains carried water, so passing urine posed no problem. By and large, the government doesn't treat the people in the passenger trains as human beings; in the A.C. compartments, there would be a fan even in the rest room. But for those in the passenger trains, they had to endure filth, feculence, the termites and cockroaches. Why would they need water-went, the refrain from railway authorities.

One paid only five or six rupees for the round trip - whether day or night - exclusively for travel in the passenger train; sleeping accommodation or advance booking were out of question. Kasinath Mane was the group leader; he was affectionately called *Neta* and had seven or eight assistants working under him. Because the situation demanded enforcing strict discipline, every assistant used a police whistle to corral the passengers - like rounding up stray sheep and wayward hens. The next major junction in the railway line happened to be Raipur. The passenger train from Nagpur to Raipur passed through Gadchiroli. Each passenger was expected to board the train at a station near his village; he was duly notified of the details - the train, day and time of travel; the return trip would take place in the next twenty or thirty days - but its details were not yet known.

Every passenger carried an insufferable airbag along with a square-foot green shoulder bag identified by a *Trisul* and image of *Siva Lingam*, its inside and outside pockets hand-sewn. The items carried included betel leaves, arcea nuts, cigarettes, and water bottle, a bed, small coins for change, dirty currency notes, note books, and aluminum utensils. The airbag carried an extra set of clothes to change, a shawl, and imperishable food items that would last for a month, like - *aval civda*, *ragi laddu*, grated coconut and a good measure of *lasun chutney* prepared by grinding together garlic, chilie powder, asafoetida, and cumin seeds. Conspicuously missing were the ones most essential in a journey: the cell phone, the credit card, digital camera, binoculars, walkman, medicines, body lotion, shaving cream, shave lotion, soap, oils and creams.

Neta carried safely inside his pocket the official papers attesting to the special rail fare for all the passengers; each passenger was responsible for his or her own personal needs - meals, snacks, tea, temple donations, *hundi*-contributions, and sundry items they bought in the trip at their own whim and fancy.

The railway platforms were long and broad, some well paved and others filled with gravel and sand, with roofs or no roofs. Many had water taps and the faucets were let open for a charge of ten rupees.

On their way the travelers came across plots of land where, following the rainy season, the farmers had bountiful crops of beans, *toor dal*, *sorghum*, onions, and now happily rested; there were villages where men could be seen in small groups eking out a livelihood with poor roads and no electricity. The travelers set down to cook their own fare: some men used the aluminum utensils to collect water and boil it ready for baths; others divided themselves into small groups to work on individual tasks: kneading dough to make *roti*; pressing the dough for *Bakri*; boiling the raw rice and *dal* in separate vessels; frying the *bajji* in another vessel . . .

They would take a small ball of dough and flatten it by hand to make *roti*. The fireplace was nothing more than three small pieces of brick or stones. The same fireplace would be shared by all - with a mutual understanding which group uses it first and who the next. There would be no tasks involving sifting, grinding, powdering, or grating; all these would have been carried out in advance and packed in small metal containers; they were called *ghat masala*. For firewood, they would be either bought or manually collected.

Carrying kerosene on rail travel was illegal but the men secretly brought a stove and a two-liter kerosene can with them. Everything the entire group needed was contained in gunny bags.

From Raipur Kanyakumari lay 2,008 kilometers away. Groups of travelers boarded the train at various stations between Nagpur and Raipur. All of them faced a reality: they might end their lives during the trip or even get lost in the way. Accordingly, large crowds of their relatives and well-wishers swarmed the platforms to bid them farewell with yellow *jilebi*, raw bananas, and fresh corn on the cob. Still, it was reported that not a single platform ticket was ever bought at these departure stations. All the formalities were in place at Nagpur railway station: the head-counting, distribution of airbags, green shoulder bags and personal identity cards to the members followed by a brief lecture by the *Neta*. The station echoed to sounds from *bhajans* with hand cymbals, *dholki* and other percussion instruments: *Jayaram, Jayaram, and Sri Jayaram . . .*

Their journey took them from *Nagpur* to *Warangal* via *Chandrapur*, then through *Kummum* to *Bezwada*, thence to *Tenali*, *Ongole*, *Nellur*, *Gudur* and *Renigunta* where they alighted and made their way to the *Balaji Mandir: Govinda . . . Govinda . . .*

After a four-day stay, they washed their clothes and had a ritual bath. The food at *Dharmasala* was excellent - and generous too! - leaving the visitors at awe how these *Madrasis* could digest so much food at one course; their own fare usually consisted of a couple of sorghum bread pieces supplemented with *lusan chutney* or a big onion, followed by a little rice mixed with *dal*. They were also in surprise to learn that *bhaji* could be made with raw *banana*. Never before had they seen groves with so many coconut and banana trees. Cattle were conspicuously missing from their view and Mahadev Thelke wondered how these farmers could cultivate the land without them.

Again, from *Renigunta* they took a passenger train to *Jolarpettai* via *Katpadi* and caught yet another passenger train that morning from *Jolarpettai* to *Erode*.

Once they got off on at a station, the travelers would spread out a rug on the platform and score some space for their refuge. The other tasks soon followed: searching for water, going out to collect firewood, and making *roti*. As to when to make *roti* - day or night - that decision had to be made with each group's convenience and the train departure times. When that chore seemed impossible, the travelers helped themselves with *poha civda*, *laddu*, water, betel nut and cigarettes. Either Mahadev or Pandurang would stand guard when others rested on the platforms with their bodies covered under shawls.

No fish or meat was to be had in the journey. Most of the travelers fasted on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Other week days they had only one meal. Occasionally they helped themselves with bananas, *sabudana* or *poha*. There was no way they could prepare *sabudana kichadi*; milk too was not available.

The next morning they converged at another platform to catch the Kanayakumari passenger train; that too was a broad station. The pilgrims had ritual baths after *darshan* with the deity *Kumari Bhagavati Amman*; visited the *Gandhi Mandapam*, *Vivekananda's Rock Memorial*, took a quick walk along the roadside vendors hawking conches and shells, and watched the sunset.

The next lap of the journey began in *Kovai Passenger* from *Nagerkoil* to *Madurai*. The *Nagerkoil-Coimbatore* trains were always crowded and the situation got worse in the weekends. Journey in the luxury buses lasted only nine hours; the bus left Nagerkoil at night and reached Madurai early next morning. But there were reasons why many preferred the train that took thirteen hours and traveled an extra 500 kilometers: the bus trip costs Rs. 280, in train it is only Rs. 65. The bus has no toilet facilities - thus inconveniencing elders, children, women, diabetics,

and prostate-patients. The bus would not stop anywhere on the way unless it was waylaid by someone wielding a sickle or hatchet. The train journey afforded the traveler to move freely within the compartment and other options: one could stir out of his seat, sit cross-legged, lean or stand against a door or choose to sleep if and when space was available. One could patiently savor the snacks along the way, including the hot *amai vada* that would be available in *Tirunelveli, Maniyaacci, Kovilpatti, Saattur, and Virudunagar*. When we said *amai vadai* here, we were talking about the snack made of *dal*, not of *masala*. Many families have been eking out their livelihood making *amai vada*; they were mostly poor, old, sick people who had been rendered inactive and confined to their homes; still they have not been defeated.

Once the train arrived at the platform, all the five-hundred at once made a dash into the train and occupied the seats. It was typical crowd from Madhya Pradesh with names like *Tali, Thelke, Shined, Balkar, Borlekar, Kamli, Kaamle, Ambekar, Ghadpare, Nadkarni, Kulkarni, Shivdarker, Morae, Bhokle, Pandekar, Pandarkar, Rane, Apte, Mane, Amraburkar, Palekar, Patil, Padkar* and their wives . . . .

Those who were smug and unconcerned - ‘This was after all a departing station’, they thought with self-assurance - felt as if hit by a ton of bricks. These were the folks from *Kottaaru, Panchalingam, Variyur, Raajaavur, Rajaakkamangalam, Parakkai, Suchindran, Nallur, Terur, Karungal, Iraniyal, Takkalai, Ammandivilai, Pozikkarai, Pottal, Eethamozhi, VeLLamadam, Putteri, TittuviLai, Taazakkudi, Pothiyur, Kadukkarai, PeruviLai, and Eesan Sangu, the Nadakkamar community from Parvatipuram, and members of Pilliamar and Sambavar community*. They could find no seat to sit with their family members; there was no space even to extend one’s leg. Hardly any space for putting away the gunny bags with *samba* rice or coconuts; all the compartments were packed full.

What began as whispers and murmurs soon grew more intense and turned into conversations: the Marathi who didn’t know Tamil and the Tamilian who had little sense of what was being said in Marathi:

“Where did all these brutes come from . . .?”

“Last year too I saw some of these folks . . . .”

“See how dirty they look . . . . Do they ever take a shower?”

“See how smartly they are dressed! Everyone wears a shirt and cap . . . .”

“They do look brave; why else call them *Marathis*?”

“What made them leave their homes in big numbers?”

A villager from South asked another close by.

“*Annaachi*, are you travelling far?”

“My eldest daughter has been married off and lives in VaLLiyur. I am visiting her.”

“Where are you from?”

“I needed to attend a ceremony in *Panakudi* . . . I was not inclined to go, but then decided I should . . .”

A party from *Arumainallur* was on the platform. Recently there has been a marriage in their family following which the rituals like *grihapravesam*, feasts, couple’s visit to their parents, offering and exchanges of clothes and jewelry were formally conducted and the newlyweds were now being given a warm send off to *Tiruppur* to set up a family of their own there. But they failed to get accommodation in any compartment. The group included the four parents of the newlyweds, their uncles and aunts totaling eight, the bride’s elder brother and his wife, the bridegroom’s siblings, and children - all totaling twenty-three. It was not known if they had already rented a *Kalyana Mandapam* in *Tiruppur* for the upcoming ceremony. Anyway, now the party had a whole set of appurtenances to carry with them for the eventual house-keeping ceremony: new beds and pillows, copper pots, lamps, cardboard boxes, rice, *dal*, coconuts, sugar, rice cooker, blender and miscellaneous bits and pieces. They also bought food in large wide-mouthed vessels for the long journey; where could they possibly unload them, sit and eat?

For many years the bride-groom’s father Malaiappan had served as an office peon in the district collector’s office. He had no brush with law - except that he had been once suspended from job for illegally buying vegetables in the *Vadaseri* fair under a false pretext the purchase was meant for the collector’s use. He knew and understood authority.

He just forced himself into one compartment where he struggled to gather the things around him. He could neither relax or nor think what he could do next.

Seventy-year old Mahadev Thelke, who had a bath that morning and sported vermilion with a mark of sandal paste on his forehead, was busy reciting Dhyaneswari in hand. He owned farms and as his name aptly described his profession, he also owned an oil-press.

“See how this old hag sits cross-legged,” fumed a Southerner. “He thinks he owns this train.”

“Do they ever buy a ticket?”

Malaiappan stared at Mahadev Thelke and the old couple from his village and yelled:

“Why don’t you move to some other compartment?”

Thelke understood the man was speaking to him.

He closed the *Dhyaneswari* in hand and stared.

“Tell him to move to the next compartment . . .

*Mathura . . . Rameshwar jaanaa . . . hamilog . . .*”

Malaiappan could control no more; wasn’t he a peon in the collector’s office?

“I say get out! Go to the next compartment! . . . Take the whole crowd with you . . .”

*“kai bolthus tumi . . . amala kai maithi nai . . .”*

When Maliappan dragged the old man with one hand while his companions joined in the fray - each with his own hand - the situation turned ugly and unruly.

Sounds, shrieks, cries spread like a wild fire into other compartments. Possessions and supplies were pushed and shoved around; collisions and bloody flights seemed imminent; the whistles from the *Neta* were heard in fits and starts.

Two railway policemen, a ticket examiner, an assistant station master and a staffer from the booking office stood helpless to do anything. A minor incident grew into a crisis. It looked like a sleeping lion has suddenly materialized on the scene.

Someone phoned and alerted the emergency police and soon a *khaki* battalion appeared on the scene followed by S.P. Whistles were heard again and now entered the collector, a Marathi gentleman from Parbhani district. He picked up the loud speaker from an aide and made appeals to the crowds - alternately - in Marathi and Tamil.

The *Netas* came forward and stood before him. The old couple were in tears as they wiped off their eyes and noses.

*“Kai sap ami lok bikari hai kaa? amsakte ticket nai ka? ami lok kus kaattuska?”*

They were asking the same question, again and again. “Are we beggars? Didn’t we buy the tickets? Do we eat dirt?”

*“E kai saap? kai galti kela ami? tumi sangaanaa?”*

Neta had in his hand the papers attesting the return rail fare for all the passengers in his possession.

“We are the poor farmers from *Gadchiroli* . . . not beggars . . . last year we went to *Kashi* . . . and before that to *Kalighat* . . . We are now going to Kanyakumari with blood stains. . . *Ee baraabar hai kaa? tumi saangaa?”*

He spoke in Marathi but his plea stirred the Tamil-speaking officers who stood in a circle around the district collector. One didn't need an anklet to demand justice; neither was there a need for the wrath that set the city of Madurai on fire.

The train was scheduled to resume its journey after a ninety-minute delay. People scrambled and tried their best to find seats. Soon their shouts turned to grumbles, then slowly abated, and finally gave way to chitchat with neighbors.

Malaiappan opened a large vessel covered with his old *veshti* and picked up *murukku* - a snack still carefully preserved and unbroken - and offered it to Mahadev Thelke.

As the train moved, the two continued their conversation.

Two men who had come to the rail station to bid farewell to their friends were now talking to one another.

“Why can't these guys just stay home? Why come here and spread all the dirt?”

Well, these were folks who found bond and contentment within their small community; they had never crossed *Melangode* in the west or *Muppantal* in the East. And it would be impossible for them to venture beyond the Kanyakumari Ocean in the South and the *Kalikesam Hills* in the North.

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(Original title: *vaLaigaL eligalukkaanavai*)