

SOCIETIES IN MOTION

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Travel, journey, pilgrimage, commute. Each constitutes a thread in the social lives of people, marking both breaks and continuity in space, time and experience. From 2011 to 2016, I have been travelling in buses, trains and auto-rickshaws on a triangular route that connects Bengaluru, Mysuru and Chamarajanagar district. Traversing a globalising metropolis, a heritage city and on to a district that lies in the rain shadow of the Nilgiris, I not only see the full parade of a society and nation in the throes of expedited change, but also the display of vestiges of cultural continuity. Each journey is a small capsule of society captured in motion; people and space juggle together to make travel a mobile drama.

Overcrowded trains that shuttle vast numbers of working masses into and through villages, towns, cities and regions expose Indian railways' economics of inhumanity. Compartments meant to accommodate between 120 and 150 passengers carry from 350 to 400 human bodies. Seats and lower berths are packed with closely pressed bodies. The upper berths are filled with young men who scrunch themselves into small balls. On the floor, people squat in various gymnastic postures. In the 23 stops that the Tirupati Express makes between Bengaluru and the town of Chamarajanagar, the pressure on the 14 coaches is all too visible. On days that see extra crowds heading towards markets with bags of grain, vegetables and fruit, the jostling to enter the train becomes intense. One day, a young woman falls under the tracks of the moving train, and the heart-rending cries of her companions bring the train to a stop. Railway personnel supervise the extrication of her body, and 20 minutes later the train chugs on, unmindful of the tragedy.

Auspicious and festival days bring on the full rush of the religiously inclined. Throngs of devout and desperate women, victims of various familial travails, visit the Shrikanteshwara temple in Nanjangud. Full-moon Fridays see overwhelming crowds and it is not unusual for the temple to run out of food that is served free. Women then travel in the overcrowded trains, bearing both their hunger and the fervent anticipation of blessings. Occasionally, one or two faint due to the punitive regime that religion and travel impose on them. Yet, there are small acts of humanity amidst the chaos, and I see a sharing of space and food among strangers.

Overcrowded trains and buses enforce an intimacy and physicality that challenge and break social norms of segregation and separation of genders, castes and classes. Prim and starched government employees put up with the press of working-class bodies; pollution-practising old women tolerate working-class women who become their travel companions, although it is evident from the latter's speech and dress that they are of lower caste; gender segregation breaks down as people accommodate the pressure for seating space.

An increasing number of trains ply between the growing metropolises of Bengaluru and Mysuru, and the small towns and villages between them. Inside the unreserved compartments a medley of people come and go; peasants, workers, vendors, semi-skilled personnel and families large and small, all travel, bearing varied signs of their lives. Agriculturists representing the old economies of agriculture talk of prices, rain or its absence; politically-inclined village residents grumble about dysfunctional panchayats and the machinations of village politics. Semi-skilled construction workers, service sector employees wearing T-shirts with the company logo, and students travelling to various colleges and institutes testify to the new urban-ward drift and the new economy. Students form groups of regular travel companions, all with annual train passes, and when they are not chattering amongst themselves or listening to music on their mobile phones, they are cramming their text books. Stuffily and over-confident middle- and lower-level government employees commute to various 'official spots', and when they are in groups they gossip or gripe about their offices, archaic rules, unbearable bosses, and ways to calculate official leave and benefits.

Outside, the landscape reflects not only shifting seasons and the marking of agricultural life, but also changing economies. Vast stretches of agricultural land that were once unbounded and productive are increasingly cordoned off with boundaries and billboards that signal the rise of real estate economy. The Bengaluru–Mysuru highway is increasingly turning into a long stretch of eateries: dhabas and shacks run by local residents compete with city and international food chains, indicating how much the food industry has become the site of entertainment and consumption. Mallappa’s ‘meal-ready’ hotel competes with McDonalds, and a new chain of biryani outlets compete with the ‘plate idli’ spots.

Mobile phones are the sign of a new distinction, and young and old, city-bred and village resident, men and women engage through their instruments in various relationships. Mobile phones have intensified sociality by crossing barriers and boundaries, and the chatter on buses and trains reproduces personal and intimate talk, business and official discussions, and routine and everyday issues. Each person seems to carry along his or her own family, office, colleagues and friends via the mobile phone. Oblivious to those around them, many speak like they would in their homes, transferring their private lives to a public space now made even noisier. Breaking barriers of social distance, prohibition and censure, mobile phones as democratised technology enable a new freedom that few could have anticipated. College students speak slyly to friends as they plan rendezvous that their families prohibit and women discuss matters that they cannot in the confines of their homes. At the bus stand, a gaggle of girls compare their mobiles, an elderly farmer describes forthcoming wedding plans and the market prospects of crops in his field, and a young real estate agent directs clients to a prospective land sale.

Changing class and class-relations are reflected in the new ambience in air-conditioned compartments and fast trains. Coupes and air-conditioned chair cars that once contained chatty travellers are now more or less silent as a new middle-class culture of privacy and indifference spreads. Unlike the shared discomfort of overcrowded unreserved compartments, social relations within reserved compartments are strained and awkward. When ‘unreserved’ travellers rush into reserved compartments, a small war breaks out between the ‘reserved’ and ‘unreserved’.

While some grudgingly make space, others insist on the legality and righteousness of their reserved seats. Inter-class hostility, absent in the world of work and wages, is now manifested on the train and in the exchange of words.

This increasingly mediatised society reproduces itself on travels, and it is not unusual to come across couples and families watching themselves on laptops. Travelling in a first-class compartment from Mysuru to Bengaluru, I was once entertained by a middle-class family of four who watched a video of a family wedding. Over two hours, they re-lived the girl's magical moment and the family's half-day of fame and recognition. In their running commentary on those who appeared in the video—supporting aunts, grudging uncles, generous grandparents, famous visitors and powerful persons who had graced the occasion—they re-lived and re-read various persons and their relationships. Within the confines of the compartment, they played out their own social lives—as mother, elder daughter, newly-married daughter and younger brother.

Travel and the bounds of the vehicle act as zones of liberation, and every now and then a romance is played out between couples. A new culture of public intimacy, promoted by television serials and movies, has led to public displays of affection and relationships, and it is not unusual to see women rest their heads on men's shoulders, couples holding hands, and, occasionally, even feeding each other. Loud and stereophonic film music is the USP of private buses that ply between Chamarajanagar and the villages around. Much as I suffer this as the worst kind of noise pollution, I gradually understand the significance of such music in the lives of village residents who demand it. The songs blast and celebrate new upbeat tunes that are full of joy and verve and are a sharp contrast to the everyday hardships of risk, loss, drudgery, and the perpetual toil of agricultural and rural worlds. Private buses with stereo music, and even films are popular and act as moving theatres that make the ride itself a trip to the movies.

Buses and trains are also sites for acts of unusual kindness and consideration. When one young college student (probably exhausted from a period of examinations) oversleeps and misses his bus stop and then rues that he has no money to take another bus, an elderly man offers him a hundred-rupee note so that he can get off

at the next stop and catch another bus home. A middle-aged burqa-clad lady calls a woman beggar with a baby girl to her compartment's window and hands her a ten-rupee note with instructions to get herself some breakfast. Bengaluru's sprawling Kempe Gowda bus hub acts not only as the central bus depot, but also as a matrix of rural and urban life, a microcosm of middle- and lower-classes. A floating mass of people arrives and departs like bees in an apiary box. The constant flow of buses, inefficient traffic management, the absence of safety measures, the crush of vast numbers of people, and constant noise indicate how poorly the masses are served. Shops no longer have public coin booths and, unlike earlier times, shopkeepers make no effort to help the odd passenger who has no mobile phone.

Bus conductors play out class relations as they differentiate between people; they use the singular and disrespectful form towards those they recognise as working class and poor, and the plural or respectful towards those they gauge to be upper class or professional. A form of rent-racking is played out in buses when conductors resort to a 'change later' strategy as they disburse tickets. Yet amidst this there are also conductors with scruples who remember to return every paisa, like the conductor who insisted on taking one rupee less from me for a return journey as he had not returned one rupee to me on the outward journey.

Travelling in a crowded train with forced sharing of seats, I observe a middle-aged Adivasi father and his son aged about seven years, who are seated adjacent to me. Pressed for space, the father holds his son between his thighs and occasionally rests his chin on the son's head, while the son holds on to the father's arm. They rarely speak but are in close communion, a bonding that is special to Adivasis, where typical patriarchal relations between generations are rarely found. The son spreads out the father's hands and points to callouses, dark and hardened spots, the result, most probably, of hard manual labour. He compares his father's hands to his own clean, soft hands, and asks his father about the difference. The father chooses not to answer and hides his palms by hugging the child closer. In their clothes and manner are signs of the commendable struggle against poverty and non-recognition, the desperate search for dignity and a new life. The son wears new clothes—a suit of polyester with embroidery on breast pockets—and new plastic

slippers, while the father wears clean clothes but no footwear. Their body language of intimacy, care and bonding compensates for the absence of verbal communication, and they sit huddled into a tight, compact space, signifying their own marginalisation in larger society.

Travel frees minds and tongues, and train journeys, especially delayed trains, facilitate an unusual kind of sociality. Strangers become confidants, and the exchange of life matters and advice are lessons in cultural psychology. Pain and sorrow expressed and shared with strangers seem to bring some sort of immediate relief, and I learn about the travails of many women. An old Badaga woman on a bus tells me about her ailments: painful knees, sores in the mouth; she cannot eat, and needs to see a lady doctor. She makes place for me in the crowded bus and seems to exude a special something as she tolerates her pain with forbearance, her face marked with lines that indicate long years of working in open fields. A young woman shares her anguish about her hostile and un-cooperative mother-in-law, her overload of housework, and her failed aspiration to be a working woman. A middle-aged man is first curious to know why I am going to a village, then queries whether I have been transferred to 'do service in the village', and then goes on to detail how he continues to search for a government job.

What personae do we take on when we travel? Or, do we continue to be what we are and display our personal selves in public? An elderly man speaks on the mobile phone with the voice and intonation of a headman directing his caste and village panchayat. A Bengali girl chatters incessantly over her fancy mobile phone, disregarding her co-passengers who would like to snooze on the air-conditioned Volvo bus from Mysuru to Bengaluru. A garrulous man enters the bus with a companion and holds forth on how a person has cheated him on the sale of jackfruit. But as the bus hurtles towards Mysuru, a different persona emerges. Far from my construction of him as a local big-man and a bully, travelling to make his money, he emerges as a humane person who looks out for others. He finds a seat for an elderly woman, advises a youth to make way for the conductor, takes a young student's bag as she prepares to alight near a college, and gently rebukes the driver for taking sharp turns on the road.

Girls memorise chemical and algebraic formulae as they travel to attend various engineering colleges that have sprouted in the

most unlikely rural places, and young men in search of employment bear sullen faces, their phone calls indicating a desperation to leave their villages. Sitting next to a young girl on a bus, I am privy to her traumatised self and social relations. On the way to Bengaluru, her home-town, she constantly calls her divorced parents, pitting one against the other, consents to visit one at a particular time, changes her mind, calls the other parent, alternately berates or begs for various favours, and switches between crying and laughing over the phone. A case deserving psychological counselling, I decide, and am relieved when she drops off to sleep.

On the Tirupati Express, religiosity marks passengers. The train carries people with dreams and traumas, families and newly-married couples, young children who return with tonsured heads, women who carry back various talismans of the omnipotent god Vishnu, and elders whose life-long dream of *darshan* of the creator has been fulfilled. Perhaps it is the very ambience created by the sense of pilgrimage that makes travellers on the Tirupati Express seem especially accommodating and cordial. A sense of communal togetherness prevails, and my friend Deepti Priya and I were once witness to how an extended family of 32 Ganigas (oil-pressers who speak their own dialect of Telugu–Kannada) shared their bounty of groundnuts with their co-passengers and pressed us also to eat some. Their hospitality and warmth extended to a Muslim family travelling without reservations, and over the next five hours they forged a new friendship with them.

Travel and journeys are not merely metaphors for our lives. In reality, they constitute experiences that tell us not only about ourselves, but bring the lives of others into our purview. Mass transportation adds another dimension to travel as experience, forcing me to acknowledge the many worlds that are so different from my own. Played out on every trip are different dramas with dramatis personae, who spring to life in unusual and unexpected ways, and whose lives touch mine in a way that I have never anticipated. In departures and arrivals, in send-offs and receptions, in meetings and passings, in companionship and in tensions, travel is about our own life and society in motion.

