

KOYNA EXPRESS कोयना एक्सप्रेस



Koyana Express to Poona

After passing through Dadar's broad station entrance, I was faced with what looked like an almost impenetrable pack of people, plus a squadron of maroon-clad figures clamoring for my business. "*Railway station porters,*" Priti had said, as I was leaving her place the evening before, "*Can make your life so much easier.*" I dutifully handed my bag to an older man with a white beard and a maroon turban to match his shirt.

Boarding

"*Smart and experienced,*" I said to myself, while remembering the stories I had been told about Sikh taximen being more trustworthy. I was hoping the anecdotes I had heard extend to railway porters.

"*Which train sah?* The man queried, with what I guessed was one of a limited range of stock-in-trade, porter-type phrases.

"*Uhhmmm...express to Poona. nine-twenty I think.*" I showed him my ticket. "*The Koyana Express, it says here.*"

Without any outward sign of acceptance or agreement, the fellow immediately whipped my bulging backpack up and onto his head, with consummate ease - as if it were a

lady's handbag - then he whirled around and disappeared into the crowd. He was quite tall, so I was able to keep track of him by following the bag, which bobbed and weaved up the broad, concrete stairs, then across the footbridge above the tracks, down another set of stairs, and finally fifty metres or so, along the jam-packed platform.

After dodging and diving through the multitude – I only had a small bag to worry about, but still found it difficult to keep up – I found him standing in front of a chai stall, with my bag at his feet. Then, with a practiced series of gestures - involving my ticket, the overhead board showing train details, and the platform – he managed to relay to me that the carriage I was to travel in would arrive at our position on the platform in ten minutes time. I was impressed: it was obvious that an experienced porter's sign language was able to translate the essentials to all comers, from anywhere ... even Australia.

We both waited for some time, then there was a totally unintelligible announcement from a high-pitched Indian voice, over a crackling PA system; a signal light in the distance turned to green and the big brown, diesel work-horse, came into view. Carriage, after carriage, after carriage, rumbled past, until the one I had been allocated slowly came to a squeaky standstill in front of me. My man then indicated he needed a handkerchief – which luckily, I had come prepared with – then leaned through the carriage window, to place it on the seat. After that, he hoisted the bag up again and set off for the carriage door, knowing that he had protected my claim to the seat listed on the ticket. I waited and watched as he negotiated the scrum inside the carriage and placed the bag on the rack above the window seat.

A minute or two later he was back with me on the platform. *"That your seat,"* he said, pointing through the window to the hankie. *"Bag is up."*

"Shukriyaa, Shukriyaa," was all I could muster, from my limited stock of Hindi. I handed him a ten-rupee note hoping it was an appropriate amount. Then with a *namaste*, hands-to-the-forehead signal, and slight bow, he vanished into the bedlam all around, never to be seen again. Perhaps I should have given him more ... he had turned what could have been a boarding nightmare, into traveller's bliss.

The Koyana express to Poona was all I had remembered from my first visit, now three years in the past. That earlier time in India had been in the dry season, but this time, so soon after the monsoon, silver screens of water cascaded down the steep slopes on either side of the train, as it wound its way up through the incredible gorges and tunnels of the Western Ghats. What would have been dry ravines when I had last been there; now transformed into fast flowing rivulets and tumbling waterfalls. The dry, brown and foreboding landscape had turned into a luxurious, green heaven.

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An unexpected conversation

As we both admired these passing wonders, through our shared window to the world, I became intrigued to talk with the young Indian woman who sat opposite. We had glanced at each other a few times as the train rolled through the outer suburbs and even before any conversation started, I had a sense she was keen to talk.

“This must be one of the most picturesque train journeys in the world, don’t you think?” I began, with incredibly bad timing, just as our window of beauty changed to the black interior of a tunnel.

“Yes, yes, I agree.” She responded. Then with a hint of humour in her voice and gesticulating towards the blacked-out window: *“Look how beautiful the view is.”* She looked at me with a glint in her eye.

The lady looked confident in a softly-coloured salwar kameez and had an attractive, lilting voice, with those curious, upper-class, Indian-English tones, which middle class females from the region manage to cultivate. It was a sound I would become accustomed to on my travels. I could spot that curious pronunciation of the V as a W when she said the word wiew, instead of view. She also did a fine rendition of the little side-to-side shake of the head, used by Indians to indicate ‘yes’, or ‘yes, of course, I agree with you’.

I asked why she was on the train to Poona?

“Oh, I need regular breaks from the mayhem of Bombay, so I come this way two or three times a year, to ‘wisit’ my grandma”

Sujana lived in *Andheri*, a suburb north of *Kalina* (my own current base in Bombay). She worked in the field of cancer research and her office was situated in the *Marine Lines* district, not far from *Chowpatty Beach*, where I had been the day before, on route to buy my ticket at Victoria Terminus..

“It’s a long, packed train journey; to and from work every day, in peak hour. That’s why I need to come to Poona: to get away from the noise and the pollution and the chaos, for a few days.

She continued: *“OK, the women’s carriage in the commuter trains makes it a little easier, but it still means ‘trawelling’ for three hours each day, six days a week.”*

She then returned the compliment and asked me the reason for my journey. I explained that more than three years before, I had visited Poona as part of my studies, which focused on Oxfam-supported work in a cluster of villages, about fifteen kilometers West of the city. I also mentioned that I was planning to re-connect with the coordinator of the project: a university-based economist, *Dr Vasant Deshpande*, whom I admired as an accomplished leader in the area of development for the rural poor.

“Yes, I’ve heard of Professor Deshpande,” my travelling companion remarked. *“I recall reading one of his books on the subject of Adivasis and their plight in this country.”* I was suitably surprised.

It struck me then, that you can never predict the results of a conversation until you actually get it going. The connections and coincidences can sometimes be remarkable.

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Poona revisited

Waving goodbye to Sujana, I walked out of the station. Memories flooded back from the time before, with auto rickshaws clustered outside and small cafes across the road. I grabbed a *dosa* from a stall, for lunch – delicious! - then headed for the Indian Institute

of Education to find the man who had become something of a mentor during my earlier visit. For the journey I selected the auto which offered a driver with a maroon turban. Was I becoming fixated by the trustworthiness of Sikhs?

On the way there, the clouds above decided to shed their store and rain came down in quantities that reminded me of the waterfalls I had been looking at an hour or two before, from the train window. But there was no time to wonder why and how it was all happening; there were more practical issues to deal with, for I soon realised that when the rain gets really serious, the passenger's compartment of an auto – even when the side flaps are down - attracts water like a roadside drain. But it was not cold; it was fun. As we sped along into the eye of the storm, the driver handed back a grubby rag to mop the seat. I got wet. What the hell? ...no one else seemed to be particularly worried.

So it was in a somewhat wet state that I came once again to meet Vasant Deshpande. I was quickly invigorated - a second time round - by the man's vision as well as his devotion to the cause of India's downtrodden, indigenous peoples. But I was also perturbed that he seemed to have lost some of the undoubted charisma and drive that I had seen before, and I judged that the intervening time was really too short to account for this. Then he explained that since I had seen him last, he had undergone surgery for throat cancer and that this was having a serious impact on what he was now able to do and achieve. He hoped things would get better.

Sadly, when I returned to India two years later, I was to find that the man whom I learnt such a lot from, had (as they usually said in India) *expired* ...a significant loss to the cause of the upliftment of India's poor.

After the meeting and whilst wandering back to my hotel through the MG Road area of Poona, I happened to stumble on a very colourful (and extremely noisy) *Jain* festival. Jainism I knew as an offshoot of the Hindu faith which dictated a strict and rather unusual code ...for both the living and the dead. This included a diet of no meats and eating only *above-ground* vegetables (thus carrots, onions, and potatoes, etc., are banned). In addition, after expiry date, the devotee's bones are pegged out, to be pecked clean by birds! One way to go to the heavens, I guess!

I stood on the shady side of the street, interested to watch the celebration and almost oblivious to the re-assembly of storm clouds above. Then, after most of the long procession had passed by, it began to rain, and similar to my experience earlier in the day, the large drops that spotted the pavement at the start, became within minutes a serious deluge, which quickly turned the road into a river.

I had found some shelter for myself, but what amazed me, perhaps more than the procession itself, was that those participating in the event just carried on with the parade for quite some time, regardless of the fact they had reached saturation point. Eventually, they were forced to give in and head for cover ...still all smiles!

The next day, I re-visited the village of *Shivtakrur*, where I had been embedded with Gramayan, a local development organization. The village had been the base for my studies three years before, and it was fascinating to meet with *Namdeo* once again: the tall, almost always helmeted young man who had acted as my host, guide, and translator, rolled into one. Over my month-long stay we had become firm friends. His wife Lakshmi, as demure as ever, proudly brought forward their son, *Ravi*: a quiet babe in arms during my previous stay, but now a very bold and busy toddler.

Travelling in the project jeep, on the way back to Poona, we passed the Ashram and first home of *Rajneesh*, the infamous Guru, who had recently relocated his empire to Los Angeles. Some of his followers – or *Orange People* as they were known - were still to be seen on the streets, but only a few ... nothing like the numbers that I had seen a few years before. I could only guess the guru's fleet of luxury cars in Hollywood had perhaps diminished the fervour of his followers, in India. There were good gurus and not-so-good gurus - and I was not really qualified to tell the difference – but it would seem that Rajneesh had hoodwinked his many followers, for his own personal gain: not the first and most probably, not the last time, for that to happen.

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Back in Bombay

By late afternoon the following day I had arrived back at my little campus *cell*, very positive - after the trip to Poona - regarding the main reason for return to Bombay, which was to connect to some of the city's schools, as part of a joint India-Australia project.

As I passed the reception desk in the hostel entrance lobby, the daytime watchman held up a hand: "*Please sah, wait, I have something.*" With that, he drew a piece of paper from my assigned pigeon-hole box, behind the desk, and handed it to me.

"For you sah. It came morning hours. Thankyou sah." He made a little *namaste* bow.

Back in my room, the heavy metal door closed (it could have been built to withstand an earthquake), I lay back on my thin mattress and lumpy pillow, to read the note:

Dear Sir,

I, Ms. Jayashree Srinivasan have been instructed by Mrs. Mabel Aranha, Principal of St. John's High School, Goregaon, to accompany you to the school. As per programme I shall meet you at the hostel at 7.15 a.m. tomorrow.

Please notify at telephone no. 6149881 for any change of plan after 8.30 p.m. tonight.

Thankyou

Jayashree S

So, at the allotted time the next morning, I was ready and waiting as this petite lady, dressed in a green sari, stepped out of the auto rickshaw to greet me. She had a big smile and proffered a handshake which seemed to exude confidence.

"Good morning sir. So nice to meet you, at last." She spoke with a noticeably deep, infectious voice.

"Good to meet you too Jayashree. Thank you for coming to collect me."

All a bit static I guess, as most first meetings tend to be. Little did I know, that this initial encounter would grow into a life-long friendship, and that Jayashree and I would enjoy many unlikely experiences together, such as travelling through the African Rift Valley and punting on the Thames, in England. On one occasion, my *Indian sister* – as I came to call her - even gave me a little peck on the cheek in public; something then regarded as a sin, which only happened in the most daring of Hindi moves!

Ever since that very first meeting outside the Kalina University hostel in Bombay, Jayashree and I have grown as colleagues-in-arms to enjoy a common understanding of development principles and a jointly held world view of concerns common to humankind ... regardless of country or culture.

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