



## Chai, coffee, acupressure!

Often writers go to great lengths to explain why travelling second class in India is so much better than the first-class version. That comes to me as a sort of reverse elitism: *“I’m a privileged story-teller, from the first world, but for this journey, I will sit on a wooden bench and bear the stink from the overflowing latrine. I will pretend I can mix and match with Indians poorest; they are so much more engaging than the rich.”*

Personally, I don’t really think it makes much difference where you sit. OK, quite a few of your Indian A/C carriage travelers might well be those look-down-your-nose, money and food oriented individuals you imagine, but they are not the main attraction here; the real focus of everybody’s attention in any Indian rail carriage is the constant stream of hawkers and other assorted persons, who ply their trade up and down the aisle.

From the moment you take your armchair seat - very often after having to negotiate and fight for your rightful allocation - the stream of hawkers begins. In fact, you have probably had to grapple with one or more of them, before even reaching your seat. All you have to do now is sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.

As said, food and drink is the first port of call for the Indian rich. The men in fact like to display how well they are doing in the shape of a decent pot belly under that button-straining, white business shirt; the ladies with a few rolls of whitish flab, discretely protruding from their silk embroidered sarees.

So the calls go out: “*Chai-coffee*,” then “*Samosa-pakora*”; perhaps “*Mix-veg soup*,” or if you want some real fat-making material, what about a slab of “*Lonavla Chikki*” (that’s if you happen to be training on the Kyona Express through the Western Ghats (as I was when this piece sprang to mind). Of course, there is some healthy stuff too – fresh fruit comes courtesy of a no hands, head-balancing performance, fruit juices in boxes (often with more sugar, than juice), peanuts in small newspaper cones ... and much more.

But there are also other, perhaps even more novel side-attractions, to support the never-ending stream of gastronomic delights. A young man selling small toys, with flashing lights or shimmering insects inside tiny boxes, will suddenly appear from nowhere and make you a proposition that is too good to refuse (impossible to refuse if you have an eleven-year-old daughter sitting alongside!). Where else could you buy such toys for ten rupees (about 14 pence)? *Poundland* becomes *Penceland* in India!

Another particularly interesting item was the rather neatly-attired magazine salesman. A friend sitting on the other side of me pointed out that he actually sold old magazines, carefully disguised inside new covers. “*Never judge a magazine by its cover*,” I thought to myself. It was a neat con on the unsuspecting train-goer and enough to fool a fair percentage of the punters too. Most of the time they didn’t know the difference, and of course our young, suited man, with the well-groomed locks, was well away to the next carriage - or the next train - by the time they suspected anything was suspected.

In India, the poor make money wherever they can, whenever they can. A captive carriage of well-endowed urbanites is there to be milked for as much as they can give. My Indian friend, when tapped on the shoulder by a passer-by, suddenly jumped up and followed the man forward, to the nearest row of vacant seats. To my surprise, my friend then appeared to be given some kind of very slow, intensive massage. I later discovered that the masseur, a member of the train’s kitchen staff, was also well-practiced in the ancient art of *acupressure*. My friend was a regular traveller on that train and so had frequent, if somewhat furtive sessions, to help ease his aches and pains. The *peun* - as the bottle-washer cum masseur is known by locals - was moonlighting in the hope of raising a bit more cash on top of his small salary, to help pay the house bills.

The most fascinating part of this particular incident was that the *acupressure* expert only had a few seconds to ply his trade, before being interrupted by the aisle-way hawkers and other meandering passengers. Most Europeans would be intrigued and amused by this, but the Indian armchair traveler does not blink an eyelash. For one of them to move seats, or stop wandering the aisles, to make the expert’s job a little easier, would be unthinkable. He had landed himself in his chosen trade and he could therefore deal with any circumstance it brought to the fore ... positive or negative.

But should you ever tire of the continuous happenings going on within the confines of an Indian train carriage, then the Asian world floating past the window can be even more absorbing. That of course is the beauty of train travel in any place: the world comes to

your window. It is just that for me, the variety on offer in India, is more intriguing and entertaining, than any other place on the planet ... inside and outside the carriage!

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One day, I began to think about this ever-changing scene of a flamboyant Indian world, which endlessly floated past my A/C carriage window. This poem was the result:

### *View from an 'AC' chair*

*The wire-meshed fans whirred overhead,  
Though it was by no means hot.  
The double-glazed window  
Of the 'AC Chair'  
Gave view to a lush  
And monsoonal green,  
That could not be felt,  
But could only be seen;  
Perfect answer to elite travellers dream:  
A safe and secure little spot.*

*Now through the window could be seen much more  
Than the tranquil and verdant scene,  
For we had passed  
To an urban scape  
Where buildings and people  
Supported the sky,  
The structure were close,  
The walls were high,  
With uncountable numbers passing-by:  
A veritable people stream*

*Then a station came into my port-hole view,  
Stopped alongside, allowed me to stare;  
Making it even more obvious,  
It seemed to me,  
That I was travelling a land  
Filled with struggle and plight,  
That responded to those  
With the power and the might:  
A memorable view, but an anguishing sight,  
As viewed from an 'AC' Chair'.*