



Boarding at Dadar

“Which train sah? An older, bearded man – headdress matching porter’s tunic - stepped forward from a gaggle of workmates, with the stock-in-trade question. I was boarding at Dadar Station, where tracks to the North and East went their separate ways.

“Initiative coupled with experience,” I thought to myself. “But is he strong enough for the job?” I was bringing a lot of stuff to deliver, in two formidable bags.



“Ummm? ... express to Poona; nine-twenty I think.” I fumbled around in my backpack, then fished out the ticket. “The Koyana Express it says here.”

Without any outward sign of agreement, the fellow whipped my bulging packs up and onto his head, with consummate ease, as if they were lady’s handbags, then whirled around and disappeared into the crowd. He was tall, so I was able to keep track by following the

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bags, bobbing and weaving up the broad staircase, then across the footbridge above the tracks, down another stairway, and finally fifty metres along the jam-packed platform.

After dodging and diving through the multitude with only my small backpack to worry about, but still finding it difficult

to keep up, I found him standing in front of a chai stall, with my bags at his feet. Then with a practiced series of gestures he explained that my allocated carriage would arrive at our position on the platform, in ten minutes.

We both waited for some time, then came a totally unintelligible announcement from a high-pitched Indian voice, over a crackling PA system. A signal light turned from red to green in the distance, and the big brown brute of a diesel workhorse came into view. Carriage after carriage trundled past, before my *No. 12* slowly came to a squeaky standstill where we stood. My man asked for a hanky, then leaned through the open window to place it on the seat. Once more, he hoisted my bag onto his head and headed for the scrum at the carriage door, knowing he had protected my claim to the seat.

A few minutes 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," was all I could muster, from my limited stock of Hindi, then handed him a ten-rupee note, hoping it was an acceptable payment. 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 literally man-handled and managed all my fears of boarding, in the midst of a thousand more experienced locals.

There was a jolt and a groan; the *Koyna Express* was mobile. My carriage slowly edged along the platform; people rushing from the stalls to climb aboard, carrying cups of chai and curried breads. We rumbled through the endless suburbs of Bombay, before

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beginning the climb through the incredible gorges and tunnels of the Western Ghats. On the heels of the monsoon, silver screens of water cascaded down steep slopes on either side: fast flowing rivulets and tumbling waterfalls, immersed in a sea of green.

For the second time in my life, I was bound for Poona, up above on the Deccan Plateau.



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