



“Chai, coffee, ... acupressure!”

“What on Earth is he doing?” I muttered to myself. My Indian friend after being tapped on the shoulder by a passer-by had immediately jumped up and followed the man forward to a vacant row. Then from what I could make out, he lay face down across the seats. It seemed all set for an embarrassing scene!

I looked around. No one else seemed at all perturbed; men reading broadsheets; ladies unpacking tiffin, kids munching on their slab of ‘Lonavla chicki’. Not one raised an eyebrow; no one even bothered to look! Then, the man standing over my friend bent down and began to knead his back: obviously some type of deep massage. It was a rather disjointed process, the masseur pausing every time someone wanted to squeeze past.

This was just one of the delights of travel in India: the unexpected. My friend, a man with chronic back pain, was a regular on that train (the *Koyna Express* from Pune to Mumbai), and the masseur, one of the train's kitchen-staff, had a second string to his bow: the ancient art of *acupressure*. A meeting of circumstance you might say. The *peun* - as locals called him - was moonlighting to raise a bit more cash to add to his small salary, but he has to adapt to the constraints of being interrupted by aisle-hawkers and meandering passengers. Most westerners would be intrigued by this, but locals don't blink an eyelash. For one of them to make the masseur's job a little easier, by not wandering, was unthinkable; he had landed himself in his trade and he therefore needs to deal with any unforeseen circumstances.

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 it can give. For many, ingenuity is a pillar of survival.

From the moment you take your seat the stream of hawkers begins. First up are the calls for food and drink: "*Chai-coffee; samosa-pakora*", then perhaps "*Mix-veg soup.*" Fresh fruit comes courtesy of much-practiced, head-balancing performances, peanuts in small recycled newspaper cones. A man with a permanent smile appears selling miniature toys at give-away prices: shimmering insects inside tiny boxes. *Poundland* in England is *Penceland* in India.

Another phenomenon I guiltily had to admire, was the neatly attired magazine salesman. My friend (on returning from the impromptu massage) pointed out that he actually sold old magazines, carefully disguised inside new covers. It was a neat con, and enough to fool a fair percentage of the punters. Our young man was well away to the next carriage, or the next train, by the time they suspected anything. "*Never judge a magazine by its cover,*" I thought to myself.

But should you ever tire of the continuous happenings going on *within* the confines of a 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. But for me, the variety on offer in India, is more intriguing and entertaining than any other place on the planet ... both inside and outside the carriage!

One day, I began to think about this ever-changing scene of a flamboyant Indian world, which floats endlessly past my 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 traveller's 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 structures 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'.*

Kyona Express, Maharashtra, 1998

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