

Journeying through the Indian Railways in *Around India in 80 Trains* (2012) by Monisha Rajesh and *Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop But Get Never Off* (2009) by Bishwanath Ghosh

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Abstract

An Indian train is a space that exemplifies a true sense of transient cultural pattern as it travels through different states of India constantly assimilating people of diverse cultures. In this liminal space, a passenger travels from known to unknown in terms of geography, culture, language, cuisine, sartorial configuration and psychological makeup. Indian Railways offers an insightful analysis of cohabitation – the conflict and the coexistence of people amidst cultural differences. An Indian train is an exemplar of an accurate secular structure, blurring the lines of discrepancies based on religion, caste, gender, sex and sexuality. Prejudices that are evident in spaces relatively marked by certain spatial permanence dilute in a train. A provisional spatial arrangement of a train therefore questions the idea of tolerance and intolerance compared to that of permanent arrangement. As the Indian train incorporates people of all ages and territories, the train is a specimen of the concept of Bakhtinian polyphony, wherein the dialogues occurring between passengers represent varied consciousness. Thus, a train travelogue encompasses unmerged voices, each carrying a unique conscious design. The people travelling in an Indian train are separated on one single ground: economy. Therefore, economic factor becomes an overarching pattern of base to assign a certain culture in a superstructure to each class and each offers a unique perspective to the travelogue. This paper will analyze the trope of the train in two Indian travelogues based on culture, Marxist economic structure, Bakhtinian concept of polyphony, secularism and the idea of tolerance.

Keywords: Indian trains, travelogue, liminality, polyphony, secularism

Introduction

Travelogues are generally located within the precincts of a city exploring different cultures – their language, food, sartorial sense, habits, rituals and manners. Some travelogues are also situated within the garb of nature and their purpose lies in exploring hidden places, rare species of flora and fauna. These types of travelogues are written with the intent to reach a particular destination and later explore. The highlights, therefore remains the city life or a distant land. The middle journey, only if it includes an interesting aspect, makes its way into the travelogue. Train travelogues are specifically situated in and around the life in a train. It deals not so much with the destination but with the journey, the fine details and specificities of people in this liminal site, their engagement with the internal and external world and their reaction to it.

India, being a country of multitudinous existence of varying cultures and religions, all unique and different from each other, a train travelogue captures this essence of cultural amalgamation. Train is a space of genuine secularism, with no discrepancies or different rules according to respective cultures or religion. The only overarching factor is the concept of economy, where each individual is allotted a specific class in the train based on their ability to pay. This paper focuses on two train travelogues giving an insight into the Indian railways. *Around India in 80 Trains* (2012) by Monisha Rajesh is a narrative account of travelling in India by embarking on eighty trains to visit major tourist places in India. She undertakes a bewildering experience of India, ranging from ticketing bureaucracy, the travelling companions and the maddening rush. *Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off* (2009) by Bishwanath Ghosh proceeds like an anthropological survey of small towns in India which offers a historical account and merge it with subjective anecdotes of railway stations and the cities. The narrative tries to infuse in it the essence of travelling in India with sincerity.

Liminality and the Train

The word liminal is derived from the Latin word *limen* that translates to “a threshold.” In the historical sense, the concept of liminality finds its germination in the field of anthropology when the folklorist and ethnologist Arnold van Gennep coined the word in 1909 in his seminal text *The Rites of Passage*. It affiliates the concept of liminality with the rite of passage, a ceremonial ritual in small societies that marks a sense of transition or mobility of an individual or a group from one phase to another in a certain passage of time. This change in phase can be identified with change in status, change in location, situation or from childhood to adolescence and to adulthood.

Gennep introduced a tripartite structure of the rites of passage with the first one being rites of separation or preliminary rites concerned with the idea of leaving a certain practice or a routine forcefully. The second in the structure is liminal rites or transition rites dealing with two features, the first is stringently adhering to the established procedure with everyone acquainted with what and how of the ritual, and the second that is everything is accomplished in the presence of the ‘master of ceremonies.’ This middle stage comprises of existing within two boundaries of the threshold, thus existing in a ‘in-between’ situation. This paper primarily deals with this middle stage. The third stage in the structure is called postliminal rites or rites of incorporation wherein the new identity is constructed and the individual is assimilated into the new being. It was with Victor Turner essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage” from his 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols* which expanded the constraints of this concept formerly reduced to anthropological configuration and encompassing to the wide array of cultural and political area.

An Indian train is a space that exemplifies a true sense of transient cultural pattern as it travels through different states of India constantly assimilating people of diverse cultures. The incessant accommodation of people of varied stature, class, sex, age, gender and race and refreshing it with “halts,” the train is always in the state of ‘becoming.’ An Indian train is an accurate exemplar of this liminal space. It inhabits individuals carrying unique identity settings, acclimatized to their respective cultural design, and gives them a space in motion, to not just interact with one another inside the train but also record the change in external environment.

In this liminal space, a passenger travels from the known to the unknown in terms of geography, culture, language, cuisine, sartorial configuration and psychological makeup. The initiates may or may not pick up these varied and unique cues affiliated to another person as the

liminality of the train keeps the transience exemplified to the initiates and only their respective destinations will finalize the product of the new self. The individuals, in their verbal and non-verbal communication engage in an open-ended discussion with either the co-passengers belonging to a different culture and hence endowed with their own cultural signs, or with the environment outside the window, rapidly and continuously changing, thus constraining the individual to fixate on any particular object and existing in a transitional phase.

An Indian train ticket was a permit to trespass on the intimacies of other people's lives and certain improprieties became instantly acceptable: tearing strips of chapatti from a man I had known for five minutes; sticking my fingers into the masala potato his wife had lovingly packed that afternoon; lying in bed watching a disheveled stranger mutter and twitch in his sleep. (Rajesh, 2012, p. 132)

Monisha Rajesh in her travelogue *Around India in 80 Trains* illustrates this while traversing around India through trains stretching as far as South Indian states, boarding her first train Anantpuri Express from Chennai to Nagercoil, to the North in Gorakhdham Express from Delhi to Gorakhpur, and she delineates the temporary form of existence of life in trains. Highlighting the varied expressions exchanged on a train journey and each articulating unique cultural patterns, Rajesh encapsulates the synthesis of this unique kind developing the liminal experience on a subjective level. The train travelogue brilliantly announces the amalgamation of cultures in terms of language, cuisine and customs attached to them as a form of surface level recognition. They become the primary product to enunciate this transitional experience, beginning with the familiarity and affiliation to unfamiliarity and strangeness, and with changing demographic and geographic momentum, a visible shift in terms of engagement and description becomes evident.

Bishwanath Ghosh in *Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off* steps further ahead of exploring the "halts" or railway stations to savour the liminal experience. With each insignificant railway station chosen in his travelogue, he highlights not just the unique narrative each ensues, but mechanically traces the discrepancies in a linear format:

Railway stations in India stand like fiercely independent states within cities and towns, insulated from the local flavor...It could be Madurai or Coimbatore. As cities, each of them has a distinct identity. (Ghosh, 2009, p. 3)

The close contact of various cultures in this in-between space leads to the exchange of traces unique to one's own culture, and in this process, create a liminal product, a result of such contact. These traces travel demographically attached to the hosts, thus intertwining various cultures together. Train, therefore becomes an exemplar, an instrument to lead to this exchange of traces. Thus the culture of the train itself becomes a liminal culture, with its state of flux taking place with each railway station. Indian railways offer an insightful analysis of cohabitation – the conflict and the coexistence of people amidst cultural differences. As Ghosh states:

The journeys are not just about the levelling, but also about getting acquainted with each other's cultures, especially food habits. Marwaris, when they travel as a large family, carry a stock of food that would last them the journey...Tamil families usually carry their stock as well: idlis and an oily paste of what they call the chutney powder. (Ghosh, 2009, pp. 4 - 5)

Indian Train: A Heterotopian Site

Michel Foucault, the renowned French philosopher and historian, in one of his lesser-known essays, "Of Other Spaces" proposed the concept of heterotopia. Describing the present world as "the epoch of simultaneity, the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed"(Foucault, 1986, p. 22), he dissociates from the conventional nineteenth century notion of the idea of linear motion of time and giving precedence to space over time. Dissecting the concept of space, reducing each to its primary and essential function, he bifurcates the site into two component parts – Utopia and Heterotopia. Developed in contradiction to each other, he describes Utopia as the "placeless place" deriving it through the analogy of a mirror, and an unreal place, a reflection of a site not how it is but how it should be. Heterotopias are described as "as a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live." (Foucault, 1986, p. 24) Foucault divides heterotopia into six different principles, each pertaining to a certain distinctive function.

This paper primarily deals with the function of the third principle, which is one of the significant parts of Foucault's essay. It talks about heterogeneity in heterotopia or the co-existence of otherness. It represents the idea of multiple spaces and "the power to juxtapose in a single real space several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible."(Foucault, 1986, p.25) He describes it through the analogy of the garden, how the existence of varied vegetation from all over the world can exist in the same space.

A train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by.(Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

An Indian train, cutting through the various parts of India and boarded by individuals of varied cultures juxtapose within this single real time space multiple emplacements. The statement holds significant in the context of Indian trains as India is the prime example of the co-existence of multiple cultures and lifestyles, affiliated to different religions and other factors including sex, gender, status and language. As the train proceeds from one place to another, it is constantly in the process of familiarizing its initial cultural scape with the new and foreign one. It continuously keeps boarding and alighting the passengers, thus avoiding the construction of a dominant culture. In a similar pattern of the "structure of feelings", as the train approaches towards places sharing similar cultural traits, the residual culture starts decreasing; the dominant culture of the train comes into play with the boarding of individuals sharing close cultural traits. As the train moves towards a new cultural pattern, the emergent culture comes into play.

The Indian train, thus, becomes the immediate and highly volatile site of the intermingling or the juxtaposition of otherness even though there might be a possibility of incompatibility. It becomes, at once, a microcosmic space representing India, and although being a site of contestation, it also offers synthesis --"Since the Kerala Express, few other journeys had included such varied topography, so the Pune-Nizamuddin Duronto Express ranked highly in our esteem." (Rajesh, 2012, pp. 121)In *Around India in 80 Trains*, the author keeps switching between a lot of trains, including Mumbai 'locals' and enters the heterotopian site of contestation time and again. She is exposed to the multiplicity of spaces and emplacements and as a result becomes, in the Foucauldian sense, a heterotopia's third principle of heterogeneity, juxtaposing in and around herself, several spaces, even though they are in constant friction. It is evident in the lines:

To understand India you have to see it, hear it, breathe it and feel it. Living through the good, the bad, the ugly is the only way to know where you fit in and where India fits into

you. Once upon a time we had clashed. But we had both grown up and changed. (Rajesh, 2012, p. 18)

In *Chai, Chai*, 'halts' or railway stations are treated as emplacements, Although stations like Jhansi, Itarsi and Guntakal mentioned in the travelogue are spaces marked by a sense of permanent fixity as compared to the dynamic space of the train, but the duration of halts comes into consideration. Ghosh describes railways stations in North India as "home-cum-workplace-cum-club" (Ghosh, 2009, p. 51) as they becomes the primary ingredient to witness the primordial version of the dominant culture of the place it represents. The emplacement of railway stations in and that of the train is marked by a contact zone or exchange zone created for the unfamiliar culture to flow in and out. These contact zones are essential, especially in the Indian context as the deviation in the cultural patterns are prone to shift at a relatively short distance and can be observed with change in language or dialect.

In both the travelogues, it is through these ephemeral exchange zones that the authors are able to record in their writing a transition in their representation of it and these zones act for the writers to engage in a new dialogue with the emergent culture while eventually outgrowing the dominant one. It should be kept in mind that the dominant culture in this context is different from the culture of origin of the author which plays a significant role in analyzing the emplacements.

Spatial Arrangement

An Indian train is an exemplar of an accurate secular structure, blurring the lines of discrepancies based on religion, caste, gender, sex and sexuality. Prejudices that are evident in spaces relatively marked by certain spatial permanence dilutes in a train. A provisional spatial arrangement of a train therefore questions the idea of tolerance and intolerance compared to that of permanent arrangement:

Shunned by society, they are nurtured within their own community, where they survive in bulk as India's third gender. But like a fraction of the country's downtrodden, they have learnt to manipulate their situation to their advantage and impose themselves wherever they go, often on the railways. (Rajesh, 2012, p. 43)

The above passage from *Around India in 80 Trains* gives a clear insight of how Indian railways and railway stations have dissociated themselves from the prejudices evident in the places marked by permanence. One of the primary reasons behind this can be owed to the spatial arrangement. Spatial configuration and the idea of prejudice as well as tolerance can be linked together upon delving deeper into the connection.

The permanent space such as cities or societies, over time, develops a homogenous and uniform population that shares some likeness which includes same religion, customs, rituals and habits. This leads to stagnation. Their eventual evolution into a like-minded community also develops a sense of patriotic affiliation on a mass level. Any threat of inclusion that might lead to the dilution of the communal setting is at once then treated as a contamination and any movement towards heterogeneity is condemned. This psychological behaviour leads to prejudices that often lead to heinous atrocities being perpetuated in the name of saving one's community.

The dynamic space, in this context, can be rendered to trains, vehicles, railways stations, cinema, malls and market. The default setting of these spaces exists in constant motion. Since

motion repudiates any form of stagnation, the accumulation disintegrates in its embryonic form before congealing to any dominant existence. The trains represent the perfect model of this dynamic space as along with its own machinery movement, the passengers are also in motion. Railway stations come secondary to it due to their spatial quality of permanence yet the alighted and boarding passengers are temporary. In *Chai Chai*, Bishwananth Ghosh attempts to embed certain anecdotes related to railway stations. His visit to Jolarpettai station is attached to the anecdote of a station master narrating the story of the collision of three trains.

I asked him if he had any anecdote to share related to his stint at the station. The guard, who was listening to us all this while, spoke up, Yes, yes, I remember. There was a major accident at Vaniyambadi in February 1981. (Ghosh, 2009, p. 170)

The spatial permanence elaborated in this anecdote is linked to a railway station for stories can only survive if they are attached to such spaces. The stories shared in trains amongst passengers do not remain in that dynamic space, but culminates as the passengers alights the train.

India can have no better symbol for national integration than the railways. The railway reservation form doesn't ask you anything beyond your name, age, gender and address. In trains, people of two castes who would otherwise not like to be seen in each other's company, cohabit without fuss for hours, even a couple of days. (Ghosh, 2009, p. 4)

Such dichotomy between the permanent and temporary spaces reveals a lot about prejudices and their survival in places, for prejudices are merely preconceived notions attached like a parasite to the hosts – the spatial permanence. Thus, an Indian train becomes the apotheosis of a secular space, as owing to the multicultural position of India and a site of many major and minor religions, the discrepancy amongst them is dissolved.

Train Travelogue and Polyphony

Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal work *Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics* introduced the concept of polyphony. Borrowing it from music, which means multiple musical lines that are sung parallel to each other achieving a sort of harmony is called polyphony. He proposed this concept in the form of narrative technique, which according to him is a characteristic feature of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels. Describing it as "plurality of independent and unmerged voices as well as consciousness," (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6) and contrasting it with "single authorial consciousness," Bakhtin asserts that the plurality of voices does not certainly leads to polyphony as many novels, according to him although try to incorporate numerous characters but the novels articulates just a single voice of the author and the plurality of voices through various characters is merely the mouthpiece enunciation of the mind through various characters. The plurality of voices doesn't always equate to the plurality of ways in which the world is being presented and engaged with.

A train travelogue, in its narrative technology shares an analogous design with Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. This narrative technology is devised more naturally in a train travelogue because even though they are under the authority of writing it, the narrative is not completely controlled by them but as the result of the reaction of engagement with subjects. In a conventional narrative, the sole control of the consciousness lies in complete control of the author and even though there is an efficient representation of the multiplicity of consciousness, it all comes from one single source endowed with authority.

In a train travelogue, however, the engagement with the co-passenger is based on random events. Two co-passengers can be from two farthest places and might engage in a discussion. The author recording these events in a travelogue therefore becomes only the medium to document and later broadcast this information in the form of the travelogue. The author is then capturing the “independent and unmerged voices as well as consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6) without their own intervention. In *Around India in 80 Trains*, Monica Rajesh, sometime voluntarily or involuntarily becomes the part of a dialogue:

He shook his head and made a strange, almost apologetic sound.

Myself I am going to Kozhikode.

He pronounced the name as though coughing up a fur.” (Rajesh, 2012, p. 32)

In *Chai, Chai*, Bishwanath Ghosh also engages into dialogue, either by chance of finding amiable passengers who offers him a seat and some, who misguides him to alight at the wrong station. Although the idea of filtering out information can lead to skewed travelogue design, for then it renders the travelogue not to stay true to its nature of genuine documentation. “Train khaalihal, kahin bhi baith jaiye’, she smiled – The train is empty. Sit wherever you please” (Ghosh, 2009, p. 90)

Anatomy of an Indian Train: An Economic Analysis

A typical prototype of an Indian train consists of compartments or bogies that are segregated based on a single factor- economy. Consisting of General compartment, this class is generally availed by daily travellers or unreserved passengers who procure their ticket from the ticket counter at cheaper rates. The Sleeper Class, expensive than the general, is usually reserved days, weeks or months prior based on the season and festival. Equipped with sleeping berths, it is usually preferred by the lower middle or middle class people, but people unable to get reservation in AC compartments also choose this. The third class called the Air Conditioned is further divided into three other types with price of each higher than the preceding one. Chosen by upper middle class and upper class section of the society, it is fraught with a different type of experience.

The structure of the Indian train is reduced to the economic structure or the base and the person’s location within it shapes their consciousness upon which gets the erected the superstructure. Since good education is generally associated with people with good economic base, it is assumed that people travelling in expensive classes must have a developed taste, skills and sound education. This is also one of the factors why coolies swarmed around this class more than the General or Sleeper, assuming they are capable to pay the amount required without hesitation. In Bishwanath Ghosh’s *Chai, Chai*, a conversation between him and the ticket checker takes place, when he sits in the sleeper class with the ticket of a general compartment.

“But this is a general ticket,’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘But you are travelling in sleeper class.’

‘I know.’

‘But you can’t do this.’

‘I know. You can charge me the excess fare and fine.’

He looked at me with surprise. ‘What do you do?’ he asked politely.”(Ghosh, 2009, p. 91)

As soon as the ticket checker is acquainted with the fact of his capability to pay the excess charge, his stern behaviour is changed into a congenial demeanor. In *Around India in 80 Trains*, the concept of an overarching economic base defining the superstructure is evident when the author suspects the father and son duo Monesh and Ksheetij who came there to help her and her friend Passepartout as thieves when they tried to help her luggage reach the train. Although she felt guilty of harboring the feeling towards such good-natured people, but it also throws light on how the economic base creates a preconceived notion about people.

By contrast, Indians living in India beeline towards anyone of interest, curious and keen to offer help. But with the proficiency of pickpocket they extract details ranging from your salary and star sign, to your brand of mobile phone and any unusual birthmarks. Monesh was no different. (Rajesh, 2012, p. 28)

The formation of culture in each of these classes therefore differs to varying degrees. Since each class is constructed to accommodate a certain set of people based on their financial capability, the physical embodiment is visible in the form of cultural capital. According to the theory of Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 essay “The Forms of Capital,” which includes money or assets, is responsible for the formation of the social life and the location of the person within that social order. It refers to the collection of symbolic elements like skills, taste, sartorial sense and manners. All of the factors are something a person acquires by being affiliated to a certain social group.

In an Indian train, divided into sections of general, sleeper and air-conditioned, which is solely based on the capital people acquire, the comfort provided to individuals in these classes is also based on how much an individual can pay for it. Therefore, even the taste, skills, clothing, habits and manners of people travelling in an air-conditioned coach is at a larger discrepancy with those in general. For financially sound people, they are exposed to, what Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’ or deeply ingrained habits, manners, disposition or skills that one possess due to their own life experiences. As one travel from one class to another, there is a definite shift in the ‘habitus’ of people in the train. In the travelogue *Around India in 80 Trains*, Monica Rajesh recounts the experiences she had while travelling in a Maharaja Deccan Odyssey, one of the royal family of trains in India:

Fluffy carpet sprouted from the floor and a white duvet hugged the double bed that filled the room. At the head, four pillows puffed out their chests, their corners tweaked into place and a snip of hibiscus lay in the center of the bed with a note saying: ‘ Welcome aboard a journey to the depths of your soul...’ (Rajesh, 2012, p. 44)

This description lay in complete contrast with her description for Anantpuri Express where she found “limp curtains shielded the windows, miniature cockroaches flitted across the seat backs and the fan still blew ineffectual wisps of air.” (Rajesh, 2012, pp. 25) She asserts at one instance in the travelogue that the luxury trains weren’t the embodiment of true Indian experience and it would be a skewed version if one travels, being an outsider in luxury trains only, for to experience true Indian essence, it lies majorly in the sleeper and general class.

Conclusion

This paper delineates the importance of train travelogues and their function in recounting the minute details of when several cultures are drawn in a single space and the ramifications of it. The

train travelogues are specifically situated in and around the life in a train. It deals not so much with the destination but with the journey, the fine details and specificities of people in this liminal site, their engagement with the internal and external world, and their reaction to it. Through this paper, various aspects of a train travelogue are analyzed, drawing various theories together and merging them with Indian railways and how travelling in Indian railways is different from other countries. The two travelogues *Around India in 80 Trains* and *Chai, Chai* give a detailed insight of how this liminal experience in an Indian train is experienced by the author and people around them. It can be concluded by quoting from *Around India in 80 Trains*:

Trains were my escape, my ticket out of the city. They allowed me to curl up in comfort as my surroundings slipped away. Unlike air travel, a cramped clinical affair conducted in recycled air, causing bad tempers and bad breath, a train travel invited me to participate. (Rajesh, 2012, p. 8)

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