

U-Turn

"Let's try the train this time," I had said to Alaka.

It is a tradition among Maharashtrian families to install the idol of Ganpati every year, at one chosen home. Sometimes, other members of a family, by rotation take turns to welcome the deity in their houses. Our family deity has always been installed at my elder uncle's house at Khar. Over the years, the Vaze clan has been gathering in his house for the one-and-a-half-day festival. They install a silver idol and perform a symbolic immersion the next day. After my uncle passed away, the hospitable Shreerang and Rashmi continued with the tradition, followed it up religiously and cordially invited all the Vazes to their warm house, for Ganapati.

All the Vaze cousins in Mumbai would gather at around eleven in the morning, after which the idol would be installed, followed by the traditional Arati. This is followed by a sumptuous meal of *Modaks* and *Masale Bhat*, delightfully eaten on banana leaves along with the *Prasad*, and after two hours of bonhomie and fun amongst cousins, and a cup of afternoon tea, everyone would return home with promises and assurances made to meet next year.

This time we had decided to take the local train to go to Khar. Shreerang's house is a five-minute walk from the station. The train is very convenient and a fast mode of transport. There had been a lot of digging and excavation work being carried out for the Metro Rail and travelling by car through traffic jams would be annoying and exasperating.

We were going to be late for the morning "Arati" because of my Hospital Rounds. We had informed Rashmi about the same. We decided that we shall drive to the Hospital, finish with the work and then leave for Khar by the Local. While I was off for my rounds, Alaka quietly waited for me in the lobby,

entertaining herself with the buzzing activity out there; nurses, doctors, patients, ancillary staff, busily running up and down the hospital corridors.

By the time I finished my rounds, it was 11.30 am and I came down to the lobby. I traced Alaka in the Hospital cafeteria, chatting away with her Gynec residents over a cup of coffee and biscuits.

‘Hi, Sir,” chirped one of the lovely residents.

“Hi”

“May I get a cup of coffee for you too, Sir?”

“No, thank you. We are already late. We have to go for Ganapati to my cousin’s place. I am afraid, we will have to leave immediately. You guys have a great day.”

Having said that, I went to the billing counter. I paid off for the coffee for everyone. Alaka and I went out. We hailed a cab from the Hospital driveway and headed to Mahim station.

Mahim Station, even during normal times, is not a very busy place. This being a festive season, it was pleasantly empty. The booking office at Mahim is right next to the large entrance of the station. There was just one person standing before us; he purchased his ticket and walked away. I was the only other one in the line. I stood in front of the Booking Counter, handed a fifty rupee note to the lady clerk behind the grill and said, “Two Khar return”

“Don’t you have twenty rupees change?” politely asked the clerk

Yes, I had. We rarely take the “local”; I wasn’t aware that “Two Khar return” for two would cost just twenty rupees. I handed the twenty rupees to the clerk, collected the computerized return ticket, kept it in my wallet and entered platform one. The 12.16 Andheri slow was just entering the

station.

Right in front of us was an empty compartment. We hastily got into the train and made ourselves comfortable on the long and unoccupied bench of the compartment. There was just an old person sitting at the end of the bench, his left leg in a plaster cast. He was fast asleep, with his head resting against the window grill. His unkempt grey hair and dyed with Henna were caught in a current of breeze from the window. The other part of the compartment was a larger one, with more people and the two compartments were separated by a strong metal barricade.

Mahim -Bandra- Khar; Khar was just two stations away. "Next Station Khar" came a cold announcement from the PA system of the train. We got up from the seat as the train entered the station and when the train came to a halt, we got off, ending a very happy, comfortable travel in the empty local.

The narrative begins here...

No sooner than we got off the train and while we were looking out for the railway overbridge, we were accosted by a strange man. He was short, wearing glasses, his paunch overhanging his trouser, he had a thin black moustache below his sharp nose, his cunning eyes looking at us, his mouth full of tobacco juice and he had a brown pouch tucked under his left arm.

He stopped us as he gestured something with his right hand. Perhaps, he was asking us where we were going. I, too, gestured back in the same way he had gesticulated. He could not reply since his mouth was full of *paan* and *mava* juice. He mumbled something; he could not open his overflowing mouth.

With his right palm, he signalled us to wait. We watched as we waited. He walked towards the 'up' platform, looked to the left and when he was sure that there was no local approaching from the other line, he stood at the edge of the platform, stooped a little bit and let go a squirt of *paan* and *mava*

juice on the railway track. He looked at us and made sure of our presence. He turned around and as he walked towards us, he pulled out a small and stained Turkish napkin, wiped his mouth and approached us. Our train had not left the Khar Station, waiting for the red signal to turn green.

"Tickets," he demanded

"I Card." My demand was as firm.

He pulled out his laminated 'I' card which was suspended in his left breast pocket by a chain going around his neck. I checked his card. He was Murlidhar Tiwari and he was employed by the Railways as a Ticket Checker. I showed our return tickets to him.

"Hmmm," I could sense that he was making some calculations in his head. He directed our attention to the exit of the compartment.

"Bhaisaab! Aap galat dibbeme baithain hain. Yeh sirf vikhalango ke liye arakshit hai. (You have got into the wrong compartment. This one is specially reserved for handicapped persons.)"

"Oh!" I exclaimed as I looked at the "For Handicapped only-24hrs" marking on the entrance of the compartment.

"Humko yeh pata nahi tha ki yeh sirf vikhalango ke liye hai". (We weren't aware that this compartment was reserved for the Handicapped.)

"Kya karen ab?" (Now what shall we do?) he said as he scratched his cheek stubble.

"Hum kya bolen? Aap bolo. Railway me kaam aap karte hain, hum nahi. (What can I say? You tell us. You work in the Railways, not us.")

"Hmmm.", said he as he looked to his left and right and

scratched his cheek again. *"Aap ko mere saath Railway Police chowky chalna padega."* (You would have to accompany me to the Railway Police Chowky.)

He paused.

"KYUN? (WHY?)", I questioned.

"Aap vikalangoke ke dibbe main baithe hain jo 24 ghante handicap ke liye arakshit hai. Aur yeh offence hai isliye, samjhe? Bolo kya karenge?" (You have sat in a compartment which is reserved 24 hours for handicapped persons. That is an offence, that's why, understood? Tell me what shall we do?)

"Theek hai, fine, let's go to the Railway Police Chowky", I replied.

Out of the blue, there was a change in his demeanour and attitude. There was a distinct difference in the tone of his expression. He suddenly seemed to have mellowed. I was unable to fathom what was going on.

He looked at Alaka.

"Yeh Kaun hai? (Who is she?)"

I was perplexed. There was a furrow in my brow.

"Meri patni hai." (She is my wife).

"Aapki patni hai? such much? Kya baat karte hain?". (Is she your wife? really? What are you saying?)

"Han, Kyun?" (Yes, why?), I questioned.

"Lagti to nahi hai". (Doesn't seem so.)

By this time, I had started to feel amused with the ongoing conversation. *"Lagti nahi?"* (You don't think so?)

"Han, lagti to nahi. Kyon ki who aapse badi dikhti hai." (Yes,

doesn't seem so because she looks elder to you.)

I could not hide the wry smile on my face.

"Abey, xxxx (That is bewakoof, which was said in my mind), woh badi dikhti hai kyunki woh merese badi hai." (Silly man, she looks elder because she is elder to me).

He was acutely embarrassed. We could sense it.

"Chalo phir, Police Chowky chalte hain. Chalo!", (Let's go to the Police Chowky, come let's go) I told him.

He was rattled. In a low, soft voice, he asked me, *"Aap kya karte hain?"* (What do you do?)

"Hum dono Raheja Hospital me hain; main surgeon hoon aur meri patni stree rog visheshagya hai." (We both are in Raheja Hospital; I am a surgeon and she is a specialist in diseases for women)

"Oh ho, aap 'gynologist' hain?" (Oh, you are a gynaecologist?)

"Jee haan." (Yes,), replied Alaka.

"Medam, aapka visiting card hoga to dena. Meri misses ko mahina barabar nahi aata. Mai usko aapke pass le aaunga." (Madam, give me your visiting card if you have one. My wife has some issues with irregular periods. I shall get her to you.)

Alaka handed her professional card to Tiwari. An expression of abashment and remorse appeared on his face. He uttered a very polite "Thank you, 'Medam', thank you" and smiled as he addressed me with a "Namaste, Sirji".

We saw the Railway overbridge on our right. As we got on to the steps of the bridge, I looked back.

Tiwari was standing on platform number one, rolling a fresh load of *mava* in his left palm. He was waiting in anticipation of the 12.36 Borivali slow.

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