

The Central Dairies

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The earliest memories that I have are of when my mom and I used to wait outside the railway station for my dad to come back from work. She would be carrying a bag of groceries in one hand while I would hold the other. She wasn't proficient in Hindi back then and I barely had a hundred words in my arsenal, so the only way for us to know if the *passenger* had arrived was the train horn.

As the three of us walked back home, my dad would narrate his day. While I don't remember most of the anecdotes, it was his description of the local trains that stuck. It, even back then, seemed like a surreal experience. There must be at least a hundred people in that compartment every day, each living very different lives, brought together for just a few minutes.

He'd describe some of these people, those he'd see on a daily basis; a group of old men, reaching their retirement age singing bhajans along the way, young men who would sit together

to go through the classified page of the newspaper, a few who still used walkman and a middle aged guy who was lost in his Sidney Sheldon novels.

This is where my fascination with trains began. Indian trains act as this grand mixer. You never know who you are going to be sharing your seat with. Trains are after all something common to everyone, irrespective of what they do or what they are going through.

Journey Back Home

Summers back then were something I looked forward to the most. All three of us would travel from Dombivli to Chennai and then back after the vacation. I'd get excited about this trip and the week leading up to it would be spent shopping with my mom for the fanciest, or as my choice was back then, the flashiest clothes, colorful sunglasses and boots too big for my small stature.

I was the kid from "Bombay" afterall, visiting a small village not far from the banks of Kaveri. I had to look fancy and there was no other choice. I had to sell the fact that I was different, I wasn't another village kid, but I was from the "City". In hindsight, that might not have been the best idea.

With all of this packed in a suitcase older than me, we'd head to the Kalyan Junction where my dad would recount the bags. Sometimes I'd wonder if he was more worried about his bags than me. The next task on his checklist was to buy me a Tinkle Digest. I'd refuse to board the train without one.

Once boarded, the next twenty four hours were going to be spent with the funny antics of Ramu and Somu and the misadventures of Suppandi while eating the chapatis my mom had packed with *thakkali thokku* (Tomato Pickle). Occasionally there'd be another family besides us and I'd quickly become friends with the kid, a friendship that'd last for exactly a day.

Unless there's some unexpected stoppage, we'd reach *The Central* within a day and each time I'd be taken aback by the grandeur of Chennai's Junction. While one could argue that Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus could match Chennai Central, I always have had a sweet spot for the latter.

A Melting Pot of Stories

Chennai Central, for some reason, still remains a very emotional place for me. Everytime I go there I start monologuing like a main character from a poorly scripted movie, to the point where my friends can only be concerned for my mental health.

The picture on top of this post probably explains the reasoning behind why I love this place so much. I took the original picture only a few weeks ago when I was traveling from Chennai to

Coimbatore, outside an unreserved compartment. The sheer happening-ness in the frame was what caught my attention. There were some hundred people who wanted to get a seat inside for themselves and their family.

Each of them had a different story about them, a different emotion. These stories, these lives, is what this website is about, because in the rapidly changing world, maybe we are forgetting the stories that built it. Standing outside that compartment, all I wanted to do was to breathe, sit there and listen to their stories, but alas I had a train to catch myself.