

Indian Railways Seals Its Birth-Canal

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At midnight on February 26, a train in India gave birth to a baby near the city of Ahmedabad. Bhuri Kalbi, seven months pregnant, was squatting on the toilet-hole in the running train when her baby slipped out of her womb, passed through the chute and fell on the tracks. Recovering, Bhuri alerted other passengers. The train was stopped and a search mounted. The infant, a girl, was found unharmed on the tracks. Having thanked the gods, Bhuri and her husband are now busy selecting a name for their toilet-hole baby; high on their list is Karishma – a miracle.

Little Karishma made it through the train's birth-canal just in time, for it is about to close. Hours before her birth, in far-away New Delhi, the railway minister of India rose to present the 2008-2009 railway budget in Parliament. Among his many proposals was one to create "discharge-free green toilets" on trains. Instead of being dumped on the track, as it is now, the "night soil" will be directed into containers that will separate liquid waste from solid, then recycle the liquid to flush the toilet. Indians travelling in trains will now have the privilege of defecating into boxes, and the birth of a future Karishma will be considerably more complicated.

Indian Railways is enjoying a resurgence, going from near bankruptcy in 2001 to a surplus of two-hundred-and-fifty billion rupees in the last year. This abundance of profits is unprecedented in modern Indian history, and has stopped the career of Lalu Yadav, the railway minister, from going down the toilet-hole. Previously derided as a buffoon from the state of Bihar, India's Badlands, he now frequents elite management institutes delivering lectures to wide-eyed students, explaining how he engineered the turnaround of India's largest government enterprise. His admirers describe his performance as nothing short of a karishma; detractors say he is merely in the right place at the right time, riding the train of India's economic boom. Whatever the reasons for his good fortune, it is ironic that the man who will close the toilet-hole of Indian trains is from Bihar, for nowhere is a train journey more degrading, uncomfortable and dangerous than in Lalu Yadav's home state, where I had the misfortune of spending my childhood.

We always travelled second-class, because first-class cost many times as much – it has consistently been used to subsidize second-class travel, although it is subsidized, in turn, by freight. Unless you had the stomach to fight your way into a "general" compartment, you had to make a reservation months in advance in a "3-tier" coach that is still called "3-tyre" by everyone. The berths were narrow and hard - another source of discomfort that Lalu Yadav proposes to remove by providing cushions - and you had to be young and vigorous to pull yourself up to the upper berth by means of a chain. You would do that, of course, only if you could claim your berth against three challengers, who pronounced

themselves equally deserving of the privilege because, although they did not have a reservation, they had tried their best to make one.

These three would then “adjust” the berth with you.

Of the words in English known to the people of Bihar, none is as familiar as “adjust”, because they are always adjusting. Every time a limb on a berth is folded – for a scratch, say - it finds its return journey blocked by foreign flesh, which has “adjusted” itself into the space. “Ah, you are going to Delhi?” the adjuster says, sometimes politely, sometimes not, “no matter, we will adjust.”

So you adjust, but there are a hundred indignities to suffer before the journey ends, taking longer than the promised twenty-four, thirty-six or forty-eight hours. Your fellow passengers – decent humans all – turn into adversaries, and the trip becomes one long battle for space and air, leaving you exhausted, vowing never to take a train again. But of course you will, because trains go where no roads have gone before; they snake their way into the most remote villages and stop on command – a man will pull the emergency cord as soon as the engine approaches the crop standing in his field, saving him the trip from the station to his home. Indian Railways is a mother, not just to Karishma but to the whole population of Bihar, even if its maternal instincts are unreliable. Everyone in Bihar has a story to tell about rings stolen, jewellery ripped off and suitcases that vanished, though tied to the seat by a metal chain that the wise bring along. At night, shutters are lowered on all windows to provide the illusion of security, turning the carriage into a louvered metal box, the better to trap and suffocate everyone in case of an accident, which is not as unlikely as you might think. On a trip to Calcutta, my sister saw men tear through the shutters from the outside *while the train was running at full speed*. Thirty minutes later, everyone in the carriage had been relieved of necklaces, gold-chains and wristwatches. Three truckloads of trunks, bags and bedding were then unloaded from the train, and the robbers, in no apparent hurry, melted into the dark night of Bihar.

After years of “adjusting”, you get accustomed to the insecurity, delays and accidents, but those are not the most degrading aspects of train travel in Bihar - that role is claimed by the toilet-hole. It is democratic in spirit: general-class, 3-tier, first-class, air-conditioned coaches and even the special saloon in which the railway minister travels, all deposit their excreta equitably on the tracks. Many strategies exist against this assault on human sensibility - hold it in, eat or drink very little, pretend there is no need to go at all – but none works on long journeys, and you must eventually face the horror of utter filth, balance yourself precariously on slippery surfaces, hold on to chains and bars and hope you do not slip. You enjoy this perquisite, of course, when no one is travelling inside the toilet, or if the toilet-traveller is willing to “adjust” with you. Ensclosed on the toilet-hole, you can look down to see the blur of the tracks and wonder if it is possible for someone to pass through the hole. We now know it is.

Every toilet has a sign – in Hindi and English - advising you not to use it when the train is standing at a station, but the citizens of Bihar usually cannot read. They heed the instruction no more than they believe the other sign reminding them that “The Railways

is your property,” and exhorting them to “Treat it as your own”, just as the Railways does not really mean to keep its promise of “Safety, security, punctuality”. As a result, the tracks that separate platforms at every station are filled with human excreta. Woe betide the poor man who must run the obstacle course from one platform to another: if a hissing engine does not lay him flat on the ground, human waste will.

Now, a son of Bihar will close the great Indian toilet-hole forever. Our stations will be cleansed of “night soil”; Indians will no longer defecate on train tracks all over the country, depositing, according to one estimate, fifty-thousand tonnes of faeces in one year. It must be remembered, however, that the railway minister first proposed this revolutionary advance in his first budget in 2004, when he set a target date of 2012. Four years have already passed. Much could derail the scheme in the next four: the government may change, the economy may deflate, or the Railways could relapse into its habit of losing money. If, in 2012, four-year-old Karishma squats on a discharge-free green toilet, that will indeed be a karishma.