

VOICES VIEWS

Journeys

Statesmen on the Train

BY LEENA SARMA

IN THE SUMMER of 1990, I took an overnight train from Lucknow to Delhi on work with a trainee colleague of mine. Two members of parliament were also travelling in the same first class coach, we soon learnt. That was fine, but the behaviour of a dozen or so other men, who were travelling with them without reserved berths, was terrifying. They forced us, the only two women there, to vacate our reserved berths and sit on the luggage. As some of them passed lewd and abusive comments, we cowered in fright and squirmed with rage, but could do nothing. It was a harrowing night. And there was no travelling ticket examiner (TTE) in sight.

My colleague and I—we were both in our mid-20s—reached New Delhi

the next morning without being physically harmed, but emotionally wrecked. The colleague was so traumatized, she decided to skip the next phase of training in Ahmedabad and stayed back in Delhi. I decided to carry on, since Utpalparna, another colleague my age, was accompanying me.

We boarded another overnight train to Ahmedabad, this time without reservations and only wait-listed tickets.

We spoke to the TTE of the first class coach. "The train is full," he said. But he politely led us to the door of a coupé compartment, with only two berths, and asked us to wait there. I took one look at the two khadi-clad men already seated there, *two other politicians—again!* ➤➤

Seeing my panicked expression, the TTE spoke softly.

"They're decent people, regular travellers on this route, nothing to worry," he assured us. One of them seemed in his mid-fifties with a smiling, affectionate face. The other, possibly in his early forties, had a warm, albeit impervious, expression. The men readily made space for our bags and us by squeezing into one corner.

The train started and they introduced themselves as two BJP members from Gujarat. I didn't pay heed to their names at that moment. We also introduced ourselves—two Indian Railway Service probationers from Assam. As the sun went down and the train sped along, we all started chatting. Utpalparna, with her MA in history, had a lot to talk about with these two well-informed men. I too chipped in. Our chat ultimately veered around pre-Independence days, the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha, the Muslim League.

The older of the two men

seemed the more enthusiastic participant. The younger one mostly remained quiet, but we could tell he was totally involved in what was being discussed. At one point, I mentioned Syama Prasad Mookerjee, pondering the enduring mystery of his untimely death in 1953. Mookerjee was a well-known academician, politician and a minister in Nehru's cabinet till he left the Congress and founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh.

That's when the younger man suddenly spoke. "How do you know about Syama Prasad Mookerjee?"

"My father used to be a post-graduate student in Calcutta University," I explained. "Mr Mookerjee, then its vice-chancellor, had arranged a scholarship for him. Papa had often reminisced about him."



ILLUSTRATED BY S. SHETTY

"Good. They know so much..." the younger man sighed, an aside.

His friend must have been happy to hear that. "Why don't you join our party in Gujarat?" he asked. Utpalparna and I laughed it off, saying we were not from Gujarat.

"So what?" the younger man interjected. "We don't have any problem with that. We welcome talent in our state." I could see a sudden spark in his otherwise calm demeanour.

The food arrived—four vegetarian *thali* meals. Later, when the pantry-car man came with the bill, the younger man paid for all of us. I muttered a "thank you," but he dismissed that. At that moment, I thought of how he rarely spoke, and how he always listened.

Our next visitor was the TTE, who arrived when it was almost bedtime. "I'm sorry, there are no vacant berths for you both," he said. That meant we'd have to go to an unreserved second-class compartment. Just then both men stood up.

"It's okay," said one.

"We'll manage," added the other.

Next thing, they spread a sheet on the floor and lay down to rest.

"You take the berths," they said. And soon they were fast asleep.

WHAT A CONTRAST! Just the previous night, I had been terrified and insecure travelling with politicians. Now I was with another young woman,

travelling with two politicians in a coupé, with no fear—in fact feeling as safe as in our own houses.

The next morning, when the train neared Ahmedabad, the two men enquired about our lodging arrangements in the city. The senior one told us that in case of any difficulty, we were welcome to his house. We could feel his genuine concern.

"I'm like a nomad," added the enigmatic younger man. "I don't have a proper home to invite you to but you can accept my friend's offer of a safe shelter in this new city."

We said our thank-yous and assured them that accommodation in Ahmedabad was not going to be a problem for us.

When the journey was about to end, I pulled out my diary, and not wanting to forget the two good-hearted co-passengers, asked them for their names once again. Indeed, in a day's time, they had forced me to revise my opinion of politicians in general. Just before the train came to a stop, I quickly scribbled down the names. The older man's name was Shankersinh Vaghela; the younger one: Narendra Modi. **R**

Writer and civil servant Leena Sarma has written eight novels in Assamese. She is now general manager of the Centre for Railway Information Systems, Indian Railways, New Delhi. She first wrote about this journey in the Assamese newspaper *Dainik Asom* in 1995.

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