

The in a MUMBAI MUMBAI locals local

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Date: Jan 2024
Location: Mumbai to the world but Bombay to me.

5:00 am – I walk briskly from home to Andheri station.
5:08 am – I join a surprisingly long queue of almost fifteen people to buy a ticket.
5:15 am – We say “Arre, dhakka mat maaro” to each other, as the slow progress of the queue makes us all restless.
5:18 am – I hand over ten rupees for my ticket to Churchgate, a distance of 25 km by road. I shed a tear of joy at the price.

5:22 am – I board a Churchgate fast and realise there are no seats vacant. I shake my head in disbelief. I stand by the compartment’s door instead, capitalising on the only time we get cool breeze in Bombay.
5:50 am – I alight at Grant Road station and queue up at the station’s bus stop with a dozen others. A vada pav stall nearby emanates tantalising hissing sounds as the first few vadas of the day hit the hot oil.

6:00 am – Our bus has been cancelled due to road closures for the Mumbai Marathon. I overhear a couple say that they’re headed to my destination. I offer to share a taxi.
6:08 am – We alight and pay our share of the fare. The taxi driver returns two rupees chutta to me. I shed a joyful tear again, being now used to Bangalore’s heavily rounded-up fares.

6:10 am – I join the enthusiastic bhangra drummers motivating the very first of the Mumbai Marathon runners who have begun turning up at this tough, uphill stretch of Pedder Road. We onlookers clap encouragingly at passing runners. I keep an eye out for a familiar face.

P.S – Earlier that morning, at 3:45 am, my incredulous-and-nervous-about-the-transport husband had left Andheri for his race’s starting point at Mahim, 12 km away, by merely stepping out of our building and hailing a passing auto. No refusals or khit-pit (Bambaiyya for hassle). Many runners and volunteers for the marathon had chosen to travel even longer distances by the Mumbai local, with special trains being run 2:15 am onwards to facilitate this. In most cities, this plan would have been impossible to execute had each of us not had our own car.

Mumbai’s suburban train – aka the ‘local’ – much loved and much reviled, makes a certain ease of life possible. It’s a unique world unto itself - one that’s part and parcel of every Mumbaikar’s life, but one that seems exotic and intimidating to those new to the city. The 380 km long suburban rail network, with its three lines of Western, Central and Harbour, carries 7.5 million (75 lakh) passengers daily, in about 3000 train runs. During peak hours, there’s a train every 2-3 minutes. This, India’s OG suburban train network, has been Mumbai’s lifeline since its first electric train ran in Feb 1925 from Victoria Terminus to Coorla, along the Harbour Line. But steam trains had already been chugging regularly between Churchgate and Virar since 1867!

Popular films like Saathiya, Ek Chalis ki Last Local, A Wednesday, and The Lunchbox, to name a few, have captured everything from train romances to train fights to Mumbai’s iconic dabbawalas. Local train travel has created a strong sub-culture in Mumbai, something that the other modes of transport cannot stake a claim to. If trains and railway stations are the backdrops, the movie comes alive due to its millions of protagonists – the Mumbaikars.

The Mumbai local can keep people-watchers entertained for hours, and provide fodder for film scripts and books. They say that life is often stranger than fiction, and those who travel by these trains have seen it all; nothing fazes them - a quality described in popular media as a Mumbaikar’s nonchalance. But come in the way of them and their train, and they can make you very aware of your inconsequence in this world.

Presenting, an array of train commuters - a bunch of people united by strong bonds forged over the trains’ conveniences as well as struggles, and following unwritten and unspoken codes of conduct. Watch and learn.

The last-minute runner

All along the over-bridges leading down to a station’s many platforms are people furiously scanning the timing display

boards in front of each staircase. “Should I take the 9:27 Churchgate fast? Or should I risk the 9:19 Churchgate slow? Which one is probably running late?” Such are the calculations occupying the last-minute runner’s mind. To corroborate the train’s displayed ETA, they also crane their neck out and squint at the horizon, trying in vain to spot the train from a kilometre away. But once spotted, they calculate its speed and distance and hence its arrival time (the display boards have not yet earned their trust), make a split-second decision, and run down the long flight of steps to their chosen platform. They will ruthlessly push all the “slow” passengers on the stairs out of their way, so beware. Qualification required for this type of passenger – a degree in advanced mathematics. Or an equivalent field experience of travelling by local trains for 10+ years. Others needn’t apply.

The sleepy traveller

This traveller often works night shifts and returns home in the morning, or is a rare, stress-free human who can induce sleep at will. While the other travellers display peak energy levels during train commutes, the sleepy traveller falls asleep as soon as they sit down, leading us to wonder how they can sleep so peacefully in such a hostile environment. Some anxious co-passengers may worry about them missing their stop, and occasionally wake them up to check where they want to alight, and also offer to wake them up on time. The sleepy passenger though is often unconcerned – probably a believer of the adage that the journey matters more than the destination – and doesn’t mind backtracking a few stops in case they miss theirs. Highly skilled sleepy travellers inspire awe by sleeping while standing in a crowded train, with one arm clinging to the swaying handle above them and cradling their head.

The grumpy traveller

“Arre, jaldi andar ghus”, “Arre, utar!”, “Tera chatri mereko lag raha hai” – some key indicators that the person is not to be tampered with. Other visual and aural cues given by a grumpy traveller include icy glares, regular eye-rolls, snorts and grumps, and spreading their legs to occupy more space and mark their territory. As you’ve probably noted, grumpy Mumbaikars love the word “arre”. Bambaiyya, our chosen dialect of Hindi, also has a strong disdain for gender rules, according respect to people, and textbook grammar, and is every new-to-Mumbai Delhi-ite’s nightmare. Some grumpy travellers are also experts in dadagiri, the local art of bullying, and seasoned travellers will tell you “Inke mooh nahin lagnekaa” (don’t argue with them). The only grumpiness Mumbaikars will cut some slack for is that

from the hapless commuters of the infamous Virar local, traversing a distance of almost 80 km. Virar-ites are territorial about their lifeline, and should you dare travel on it until merely Andheri (a stop that’s roughly midway), they are open in their contempt. “Tereko aur koi local nahin mila kya re?” referencing that you could have taken a short-distance train instead of adding to the crowd on their route.

The fourth-seat demander

Train widths haven’t changed much over the decades, but passenger density sure has. So seats built for three are occupied by four. This fourth seat though is “unofficial”, so you must be prepared to be denied it, especially on sweltering hot days, or in the monsoon, when sitting packed like sardines, with squishy wet clothes, is beyond the tolerance of the usually stoic Mumbaikar. But these unwritten rules don’t prevent certain eternally optimistic people from saying “Zaraa sarko”, for the chance to park no more than one of their butt-cheeks on the edge of the seat. If they are lucky, they get enough space for half of the second butt cheek too, subject to the collective widths and inclinations of the other three seatmates. Sitting on the fourth seat is known

a guaranteed seat. Whether it means travelling only by a ‘starting train’ (which originates from the station), or throwing a bag or large object onto an empty seat as a train arrives (a handkerchief no longer cuts it), or even travelling for a few stops in the ulta (wrong) direction so that they have an assured seat when the train resumes its journey in the reverse direction, the great seat-catcher has perfected these strategies over many years. Another trick involves becoming a ‘train friend’ with someone, with the friend then being assigned the tough job of fiercely guarding a spare seat for them. However, the most risk-free and conflict-free method is the ‘booking system’, where you enquire with everyone seated around you about the stop they will alight at, and then make a suitable “reservation” of the seat that will free up first. This booking is under oath and must be honoured by the currently-seated party, else they risk jinxing their future seat chances.

The reluctant and the petrified

They can be identified by their dead give-away eyes, perennially widened in fear. The reluctant have usually been

coerced into riding the train by their companion, a hardened Mumbaikar. Sometimes, lone reluctant individuals can be spotted too; these have been ill-advised by some local into believing that this is the best way to travel from A to B. The petrification sets in when they arrive at the station and witness utter chaos, leading to a momentary desire to flee. Alas, it is often too late, as they could be pushed by the surging crowd into the very train they were debating whether to take. During the train journey, this category of passengers is also known to pray furiously, pledge coconuts to deities for their

to be a great workout for your core strength, glutes and quads. Tips – best avoided if you struggle with physical intimacy or strangers’ elbows in your waist. Though sitting sideways on this aisle seat alleviates some of the distress. Whether the fourth seat is a better alternative to being in a full-length sandwich while standing is a debate that hasn’t yet been resolved.

The great seat-catcher

They have mastered the art of snagging

safe return, and nervously ask co-passengers “Dadar kab aayegaa?” until they are violently ejected from the train at the said station. Having been pushed out through gaps they never even thought were traversable, they are now left rethinking the laws of physics and biology. Once in a while, unable to exit at their station, they scream in fear, only to be consoled by people saying “Tension kayko leneka? Next station pe utaar denge.”

The one with all the children

Travelling solo on a Mumbai local is a tough skill, so I’m sure you’ll find this category of traveller worth venerating. It requires daredevilry to live in Malad and plan a picnic to Chowpatty with many nieces or nephews or friends of their children in tow. ‘The one with all the children’ (let’s call them OAC) has to herd a bunch of gagging

into a train, find seats for all of them, and ensure they don’t accidentally get thrown out in the tide-like movement of people in and out of the train at every station. When exiting, OACs need to keep the children huddled in front of them and push each one out, while remembering to not mix them up with kids from another bunch. And all this while dealing with the stares and sniggers of their fellow-passengers, aghast at their prolific procreation. The OAC also knows that people are wondering whether they bunked the class about birth control at school. And that somebody who noticed that the troupe boarded at Malad is bound to make a Mala-D joke (Mala-D was a very popular contraceptive, widely advertised on prime television). The OAC feels compelled to sheepishly grin every now and then and clarify to the other passengers “Sab mere bachche nahin hai.”

The long and the short of it

Simply put, nowhere drives home the benefits of being tall than a Mumbai local. Having your head above everyone’s armpits, feeling the strong breeze on your face, and being able to see as usual is an incomparable privilege, as is being able to cling to the handle on the ceiling without the threat of dislocating your arm from its socket. Compare this with the vertically challenged, whose view only encompasses people’s backs and bags; during peak hour, they are sometimes unable to even see which station has arrived, and rely on the chants from the crowd to decide their move. If you are a child, it is worse, having your face pressed against butts. The only equaliser for all heights was

this - decades ago, when fisherwomen used to carry baskets of fish over their heads in the passenger compartment, the tall had to deal with the scent and the sight of sometimes-still- weakly-flopping fish, while the short had to deal with a shirodhara-type drip of fish water over their heads. There were no winners in that scenario.

The “rich” first class traveller

The first class compartment, identified by striped paint over the entrance door, is where you go if you’re in the mood for a little splurge. Have 100 rupees? Treat yourself to a first class ticket from Andheri to Churchgate. For 10X the usual ticket fare, you get hit, pushed and yelled at fewer times. Other perks include some semblance of a physical boundary around yourself, and fewer ‘train massages’. In fact, “Yeh first class nahin hai” is a taunt you’ll often hear in the second class aka the regular compartment, if you complain about somebody’s foot being on yours. The first class is mostly filled with

“posh” travellers, so you even hear an NRI accent or two. It is also filled with college students with anxious parents, who have decided to lessen the chances of their child getting hurt; and also elderly Mumbaikars with anxious children, for the same reason. But the biggest flex is having a separate ticketing counter at the station - many live for the jealous expressions of those queued up, as they walk straight up front and say “Ek Borivali first class dena”. It’s the equivalent of the fun of business class pre-boarding in flights, for a mere fraction of the price.

The wish maker

Mumbai comprises of multiple islands, which means that railway lines often cross creeks (khaadi in local lingo). A khaadi would almost always announce itself a minute or so before its actual appearance, due to its infamous foul smell that could probably revive the comatose, or conversely, cause those with a heightened sense of smell to faint. If you inexplicably miss the pre-warning smell of an oncoming khaadi, the train gives you a sure-fire signal with the unique rattling sound it makes on the metal bridges over these creeks. This is where the wish-maker leaps into action, throwing coins into the creek followed by a quick prayer. Nobody knows whether these wishes come true, but that doesn’t stop them from repeating this at every creek crossing. The khaadi also doubles up as an alternative to a holy river, and sometimes flowers, coconuts, and other offerings are dumped into the creek encased “conveniently” in a plastic bag. I bet that creeks have been fervently wishing for the disappearance of these wish-makers, and given that Gpay and Paytm have led to no more coins being available with most people, I guess the creeks’ wish has come true after all!

The enterprising home-chef

This person boards like any other unassuming commuter. Once seated, they smile benevolently and make eye contact with whoever reciprocates. Soon, that large bag they’ve been carrying has done its job, and there’s a fragrance of home-made deliciousness

wafting out; many commuters have begun sniffing around, looking for signs of the food. That’s when the entrepreneur strikes, opening up the bag and pulling out goodies – khakra, chivda, other assorted farsan, papads, seasonal pickles and anything else that reminds you of grandma’s kitchen. It’s a losing battle – might as well open your purse and succumb to the temptation. The smiling lady does brisk business and answers all questions efficiently, while also handing out her phone number, calculating the total of somebody’s purchase, and doling out change to a third customer. The enterprising home-chef is always a welcome co-passenger.

The train friends

Train friendships and train romances have a lot in common: when you take the same 8:53 local every morning, and see the same people every day, sooner than later, you start smiling at each other. A few days or weeks (some Mumbaikars are tough nuts to crack) later, there’s a casual exchange of names and where you work and where you live. Before you know it, you’ve switched loyalties from your 5:17 evening train to the 5:22, only so you can synchronise your commute home with your train friend. And then you reach a milestone stage where your friend places a handbag on the seat next to them, risking great ire, only to give you a fleeting chance at sitting together. A train friendship is different – you may never hang out at restaurants or visit each other’s homes, but you celebrate everything from birthdays to festivals in the train. You also offer each other a shoulder to cry on along with free counsel. Exclusively train friends are now a dwindling tribe, and the comfort of the strangely high intimacy that comes with the relative anonymity has been lost.

The lovebirds

With trains so packed that the handles are redundant to hold on to, sometimes friendship surreptitiously slides into another territory. And romance blooms at close quarters, literally. Most Mumbaikars couldn’t care less about

the adoring glances lovers exchange with each other in a jam- packed train, so they are both in a sense alone in spite of the crowd. But dare they not snap out of that reverie at every stop, resulting in blocking someone’s exit at say, Bandra, the lovers will be showered with the choicest barbs, the mildest of which are “Arre, hato” or “Phillum (film) samajh rakha hai kya?”. Trains offer love-struck couples in Mumbai a judgement-free space that can be easily built into their daily routine, and a convenient alibi to give their families.

The eavesdropper and truth dispenser The eavesdropper usually prefers seats around people who are having conversations, be it live or over the phone; this serves as their entertainment during the commute. They are sometimes so hooked to the conversation that they chime in with encouragements or words of wisdom. They can be brutally honest in their feedback, since they are invested in you but absolutely unrelated to you and will likely not see you again; this sort of feedback is often helpful, because friends and family will never be that candid. You can spot these eavesdroppers thanks to their fixed gaze locked on their subject, and their facial expressions reacting to the topic of discussion. If you didn’t know about the eavesdroppers, you’d probably think they’re an actor rehearsing for a play.

The news debaters

These commuters begin their day by grabbing the day’s newspaper from the magazine stall at the station each morning and silently reading it during their commute to work. By the time they return in the evening, the news has been digested, opinions have been formed, and the itch for a debate has emerged. So they eagerly wait for their friends, and then both parties begin the loud and detailed exchange of news. Sometimes, we are treated to them having collated the news from multiple newspapers throughout the day, along with the added bonus of their expert insights. It could be seen as a public service of sorts, because

you can now go home and spend your time doing something else instead of watching the nightly news broadcast. This facility is either a delight or a nightmare for the other passengers, with the delighted chiming in with their points, and the annoyed scouting for another vacant seat so that they can escape this forced news bulletin.

Clubs on wheels

Until the advent of the smart-phone, the Mumbai local housed many informal clubs. Morning commutes were more sombre, with people engaged in silent prayer, reading the newspaper, or catching up on sleep. But come evening, the train’s hospital-white fluorescent lighting along with the setting sun creating coloured screens at every window became the ambience for raucous fun.

Adding to the pub-like character were the advertisements plastered all over the compartment, promising help with your sexual troubles, or a miracle oil to regrow hair, or a work-from-home job that can apparently make you a millionaire. Against this backdrop, card games were played – largely in the gents’ compartment – with the morning’s newspaper ingeniously spread across two or four people’s laps, doubling up as a table. Money often changed hands, though these were playful bets of small amounts. Elsewhere, another group would be loudly playing antakshari, venting out the day’s frustrations with expressive singing – Mumbai’s version of music therapy. The more spiritually inclined were part of bhajan or folk music groups, accompanied by cymbals too. Nowadays, all this has been largely replaced by people glued to their phones and their own world of online clubs.

Pop-up flea markets

A Mumbai local is a space for thriving business, and vendors expertly jump on and off the trains with their wares, in a bid to avoid being caught by the police. They make sales that aren’t strictly legal, but are much loved by commuters, who couldn’t care less about legalities. Mumbaikars support everyone’s honest attempts at earning

a living, for they know how hard it is to survive this city. In return, the vendors cater to popular demand with a wide variety of seasonally changing wares: earrings, hair-clips and scrunchies, bracelets, and bindis are the most popular ‘fast-moving’ items. But books, pens, handbags, and snacks also deserve a mention. These vendors offer competitive prices and have been experts at targeted advertising much before today’s ad gurus learnt it from their expensive MBAs. It’s a win-win for the vendors as well as the commuters, and is a popular way to pass time.

MasterChef India: Mumbai local edition

Women (and rarely, men) chopping vegetables during their evening commute home used to be fairly common, especially on long routes. Though born out of the desperation for time- management, this was a fun way to get a head-start on dinner prep, surrounded by train friends and exchanging recipes and gup-shup (Marathi for gossip). For the rest of us, the suspense was akin to a reality show: What’s the menu? Will they prep everything before their stop? Will they avoid slicing their fingers? It used to be fascinating to see their knife skills in a fast-moving, vibrating train, deftly slicing onions held in their other hand. Meticulous ‘train chefs’ had two bags on their lap – one for peels and one for chopped veggies. But making jaws drop were commuters with what seemed like a portable kitchen – they’d casually pull out a chopping board, a knife, and even a peeler from their handbag, which seemed endowed with magic. You half-expected a mixer to emerge from the bag next, to grind masalas. This sight of vegetables being chopped has almost fully disappeared in the past decade though. However, it still is an iconic imagery associated with Mumbai locals.

A jeweller, a fisherwoman and a dabbawala walk into the sunset.

The local train has always been a great leveller: rich or poor, we use the trains to commute. Until the early 2000s, most Mumbaikars didn’t see the need to own cars. So it was fairly common to see jewellers and diamond merchants on the Mumbai local, sporting ‘safari suits’ (do look up this legendary power statement), coolly carrying briefcases with goods worth lakhs. Not anymore, though.

Another childhood memory is of Koli fisherwomen with baskets of fish on their heads, their hair in a bun with a fresh jasmine strand, transporting that morning’s catch to the dockyards or markets; they were eventually mandated to use the dedicated luggage compartment that is there on every train, as were the dabbawalas and any other vendors or businessmen carrying large consignments. But barring on some early morning trains, or along the Harbour Line, the sight of small-scale fishers transporting fish has sadly almost disappeared.

The dabbawalas, though not as ubiquitous as before, still use the Mumbai locals. It is heartening to see their livelihood and unique system occupying space amidst the Swiggys and Zomatos of today. The comfort of receiving a home-cooked lunch is something many Mumbaikars seem unwilling to forgo, leading to the dabbawalas retaining their much-loved and appreciated presence in the city. What has hopefully and thankfully disappeared for good is the gory news of gangsters chopping up their rivals in trains; is it an exaggeration, is it not? We’ll never know.

The one with the bragging rights

That’s people like my husband; remember the beginning of this essay? A non-Mumbaikar, he began his tryst with the Mumbai local by being a reluctant and petrified commuter, successfully conned by me into taking it everywhere. In due time, he graduated to the fourth seat demander, and an occasional window shopper. He is now a huge fan of the freedom afforded by public transport and can navigate the train network without my supervision. Though not always fully accustomed to the Mumbai local, the ones with the bragging rights have learnt the ropes enough to survive, even if with some injuries. And the stories of what they see or go through? Those grant them the bragging rights with family, friends, and any future children or grandchildren. Their travel tales are often spiced with extra masala, but they’ve earned their stripes the hard way and can be indulged.

And who am I?

The nostalgia seeker

They are true-blue Mumbaikars currently living in another city. They miss the ease of commute. They return home a few times each year, and make it a point to travel extensively by the local. They haunt their favourite stalls at every station, sighing with nostalgia. They are sometimes caught unawares by changes – the station entrance has changed, the ticketing counter has moved, the ‘Energee’ stall no longer exists, and strange new AC trains sometimes turn up. A few platform numbers too may have changed, throwing them off their well-oiled routine of decades. They dread not knowing about these changes and having to ask somebody, who could then ask them “Aap kahaan se?” and erase their whole identity. The nostalgia-seeker sighs wistfully and frequently, including indulgently at all the fellow passengers and their idiosyncrasies. They’re sometimes so driven by nostalgia that they feel the need to photograph and document the station, the train, the crowd, the windows, the handles, and everything else; but they don’t do so because, you know, which REAL Mumbaikar does that?? So the only thing they do is take mental photographs and maybe write about the people of the city that will always be home.

Circling back to that day in Jan 2024, after waving to my husband at the Pedder Road leg of the Mumbai Marathon, I took a train to Churchgate, using my morning’s still-valid ten-rupee ticket, well in time to cheer for him at the finish line at Azad Maidan. After the race, we walked to Churchgate station to take the train back home, as did many runners and their families. I stopped at the station’s vada pav stall to buy us both celebratory vada pavs.

Since Churchgate is a starting stop, and the trains are relatively empty on Sundays anyway, all the runners – identifiable by the shiny medals and sweaty towels around their necks –

had the rare chance to sprawl out on the seats. Some could even stretch their sore legs to the seats across. The Mumbai local, usually scented by fish, smelly khaadis, and sweaty armpits, was redolent with the sweet smell of their success and accomplishment.

And this 9:10 Virar fast, which I had chosen to board just for the thrill of it (Sunday was the only day I’d dare to!), deposited us in Andheri promptly at 9:40 am. We walked home to our 450 square feet ‘matchbox apartment’ – tiny apartments that befuddle and entertain non-Mumbaikars just like the local trains do. But that’s another story for another day.

Raji is a distressed architect, aspiring writer, and exhausted Bangalorean. Cities with public transport systems bring her to life. A slow travel enthusiast, she often disappears to learn from travel, which she considers her lifelong teacher. Travel, writing and photography are her lifelines.