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CHAI-SAMOSA, JHUK- JHUK GAADI and INDIAN WRITINGS

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*Address for Correspondence: editojhp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

The passengers spread across an average 24 coaches of an Indian train, reflect clear and distinct the enormous cooking pot that the nation is — churning Indian lives tempered with myriad flavors of religion, caste, region, professions, financial status, and customs. A major source of livelihood for some, commutation for others; trains have also inspired authors and artists thanks to the rich tapestry of life that it hauls along the tracks.

The Indian railway with a legacy of 166 years has seen phenomenal changes in terms of service and infrastructure and interestingly in the performance of the passengers—notably in the domain of food consumption. This change in style of food consumption is not merely about *aloo parathas* paving way to *idli vadas* as trains haul about. Rather it is about the changing systems of catering to the passengers that is more interesting. From rich cuisines served by smart conductor-guards onboard, to home-cooked meals carried along by passengers, to the endless cribbing sessions around soggy *daal* and half-cooked rice served from the pantry cars but ordered nevertheless, to the current e-catering services that offers McD and other food chains; Indian Railways has seen it all.

The paper thus seeks to look into the representation of changing food cultures in trains, itself an outcome of the changing norms of a nation, as duly recorded and commented upon by authors across Indian fiction and travel writings, especially post- Independence.

Keywords Indian Railways Food practices Travel Indian Writings.

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Paul Theroux was right in calling the Railways “irresistible bazaars” which is especially true in the case of Indian Railways characterized by the din of people and baggage, passengers bartering seats, and vendors shuttling forth the coaches with wares ranging from *chai-samosa* and Bisleri bottles to toys, phone covers, and books! Trains in India clearly reflect what an enormous cooking pot the nation is —churning Indian lives tempered with myriad flavors of religion, caste, region, financial status, and customs.

Indian Railways has had a paramount influence in redefining the social and cultural norms of the nation. With its inception in 1853, trains not only changed the perception of temporality and spatiality but became instrumental spaces where class and caste barriers were blurred. Trains continue to be the spatial-temporal context eliciting social responses unlike any other form of transportation; offering glimpses into the behavior and interactions of people in public spaces. Though a large number of discourses rally around the economic impact of Railways on Indian society, few look into the significant influences it had on the societal and cultural aspects of the nation (Awasthi 2).

This paper attempts to see trains as public spaces where people exercise their social and cultural practices. Emphasis is laid on food consumption practices in trains which become a marker of the socio-cultural position of

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passengers. The paper explores the changing food culture in trains, itself an outcome of the changing norms of the nation, as represented in the literatures on Indian trains. The numerous trends that the Indian Railways has seen in the domain of catering and servicing, the changing passenger preferences, and the economic and political implications of agencies like IRCTC and other establishments that constitute a unique food industry inherent to Railways transforms the act of food consumption, even within trains, into a discourse with social, political and cultural dimensions.

The primary texts of the paper include *Around India in 80 Trains* by Monisha Rajesh, *The Great Railway Bazaar* by Paul Theroux, *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh (travel writings) and the tales of Ruskin Bond that are infused with his many memories of train travel. The authors capture the essence of the Railways—the passengers—and also explore facets of the Railway food industry such as businesses of vendors peddling in trains, the wide discrepancy between the services on luxury trains and other regular trains, other resources for food onboard etc., which contribute to the larger economy. Comparing Theroux's travels made in 1973 and Rajesh and Ghosh's in the 2010s shows the many changes that have come—in the domain of food and others in Indian Railways—over the years and Bond's writings further fills the years in between. The authors draw attention to the changing social phenomenon in trains and give their valuable insights to the same, drawing parallel to the changes within the larger context of the nation itself. By merging the independent fields—Indian Railway travel, Indian literature, and food practices in trains—the paper not only gives new perspectives about each but also reveals how each domain affects the other.

Food is an integral part of Indian travel with many preferring to carry home cooked meals, whatever the mode of transport and duration of journey. Food and water containers often constituted half of the entire luggage and the food items range from snacks to complete meals. The reputation for the Railway catering agency was so bad that many preferred not to opt for the meals served onboard. During the 1940s, bottled drinks were highly uncommon hence most often orange or lime juice were prepared from home and taken along journeys (Bond 70). Ghosh writes how, be it the Marwaris or the Tamils, across cultures people packed food from homes and the only difference was the cuisine. *Idlis* and chutney powder was the hot favourite of the Tamilians while the Marwaris would be accompanied by piles of *puris*, *subzis* and pickles (2.0).

The prospect of a journey could be a tedious affair for the womenfolk of the household as they have to cook food that should be more than sufficient for all and also last for several days of the journey. The young women of the travelling party continue to serve the meal first to the elder men, irrespective of the community. The customs followed in public seem to be the same as those followed within the closed walls of a home. In India, the trains thus are no alien spaces where practices and beliefs are tweaked. People continue to be the way they are, despite being in a public space, amongst strangers who may not even belong to their culture.

The Woman on Platform 8 captures the delight of solo travel at a young age and contrasting perceptions about it. It has an episode where the protagonist's friend's mother showers warnings on the two boys to not eat outside, unhealthy food, and hands over a stash of chocolates and fruits to be shared between the two (Bond 16). On the other hand, the protagonist's parents consider him old enough to travel on his own and have not even come to send him off. People thus hold varied views about train journeys, though a large chunk would agree with the over-concerned mother.

The Indian millennial today however hardly bother to get meals from home. They would rather get parcels from restaurants or buy from the vendors in trains or stations or opt for the new age e-catering services. An elderly couple having their homely meals from the classic steel tiffin carriers is a past tradition, fast vanishing. Even amongst those who carry food, the steel carriers have made way to food wrapping foils and Tupperware boxes as Rajesh notes (71).

Indian Railways has earned a bad name for itself in the zone of food catering. The endless cribbing of passengers about the soggy *daal* and half-cooked rice served from the pantry cars (ordered nevertheless) keeps the IRCTC on the lookout for new options to catering onboard. Yet it might come as a surprise to many that there was a time when services

on trains, food and others, were par excellence. Designed to pander to the British standards of comfort and luxury, the Railways continued services, even in regular trains, like a dining car, conductors, and rich, diverse menus until the 1980s, as is evident from the writings of Theroux and Bond.

Poor investment and management led to the deterioration of the Indian Railways post the 1970s and to fulfill the increasing demand, many coaches were replaced. Ghosh quotes S Murali, Former Financial Commissioner, Railways, who said that the first class coaches were replaced by AC sleeper coaches to bring in more revenue. Great efforts were made to improve the third class compartments but the services to the first class and AC coaches were then compromised. The concept of dining cars and impressive conductors, and hence regal experiences of dining, faded away and is a luxury familiar only to a select few who have travelled on the luxury trains in India.

Theroux visited India in 1973 at a time when the dining cars and conductors were functional, albeit in a state of stagnation. The conductors catered to the needs of the first class passengers in trains. They served tea and food, announced the stations, did the bedding and offered any other assistance asked for—even buy beer for Theroux! Vasudevan K writes how in the first class coaches of the era, tea and coffee were served in porcelain cups and saucers unlike today's plastic cups.

Interestingly, a conductor-guard marks his presence in the story *Barin Bhowmik's Ailment* by Satyajit Ray. Set somewhere in the early 1970s, Ray characterizes the conductor-guard as a “portly, rather amiable, gentleman” who guides the first class passengers to their seats, takes orders for meals from them which has not only vegetarian and non-vegetarian food but also offers choices in Indian and Western cuisine (Bond 138). Even Theroux notes how dinner trays included hamburgers and came with knives and forks and markedly was ordered by an Indian (34.3). Bond writes how train travels were extended picnics with “railway meals in abundance brought by waiters in smart uniforms” (68).

Theroux is lucky to encounter a conductor even in a local train bound to Rameshwaram as the train had no pantry and the conductor's sole responsibility was to deliver a tray of food and take it away once finished; acknowledging Theroux only with a “drowsy salute”(42.9). Thus, there was already a lack of professionalism emerging. While travelling in the Rajdhani Express he also comes across a dining car bereft of its early Imperialist finesse—reduced to merely a narrow room with broken chairs and tables.

Rajesh too writes how a co-passenger regarded the 1950s to be golden age of train travel. Those were the times when dinner would be served to the coupe and their names were printed on the respective plates. Chatterjee notes how during the British rule, dining cars were impeccably clean and were serviced by waiters, and the menu was excellent, but Indians were not allowed then. The Railways also provided fine crockery supervised by an attendant. The options available to the British passengers were magnificent while Indians huddled in wooden seats. However, there was a time when Indian trains served quality food even after the Raj and the gruesome food experiences that one always associates with the Indian trains is unfortunately a recent phenomenon.

The premium trains like Rajdhani and Shatabdi include meals within the fare unlike mail trains. Rajesh while travelling in the Durgam Express notes how the quality of food is markedly different from regular trains. The menu included breadsticks, chilli tomato soup, and a lunch of mutton curry, *dal*, rice and rotis—a luxury compared to other train meals. Premium trains are accessed only by a select few while majority continue to travel in regular trains, where food quality is highly questionable. Luxury trains too cater mostly to the foreign tourists and with such stark demarcations emerging based on monetary differences, it is impossible to overlook the economic aspects associated with the food industry associated with Indian Railways.

The luxury trains of India are the only remnants of the past splendor of the British style of Indian travel. Hardly any Indian will be aboard these trains apart from the staff. While Rajesh meets a fellow countryman who has been awarded a ticket to the train by his company, Aitken fictionalizes an Indian journalist who has been invited to write a

review for the maiden ride of the Palace on Wheels (POW) (Bond 152). Rajesh also notes how a co-passenger, Professor Khanna, is unable to distinguish between Palace on Wheels and the Indian Maharaja- Deccan Odyssey and who accepts that he did not even know that such trains existed. India's own luxury trains are a distant dream for majority Indians and not surprisingly he even enquires about the food aboard!

Aitken's protagonist Balbir Arora feels that the food served on the two dining cars of the POW was much better than what the 5 star restaurants offered. The POW displayed “outstanding and varied menus” and even a well- equipped bar. The menu was so tempting that no one wished to skip any course and people often suffered from indigestion due to the rich and heavy meals.

Rajesh enjoys a royal ride on the Deccan Odyssey and she writes that though the train arrived, “no soul emerged” (25). Considering that this is in India where people get on moving trains and overflow from Mumbai's locals, it clearly strikes the reader how 'foreign' the luxury trains are to Indians. The dining cars and conductors are kept alive only in such luxury trains. The gloved waiters gracefully attended to the guests in the dining car serving *thalis* with biryani and a *pappadum* that opens like a flower to reveal salad within. Sweets like *gulab jamun* were served on silverware. The breakfast menu was a blend of Indian and Western cuisine with dishes like *chana puri*, *usal pav*, bacon, sausages, eggs, and ham. Both the luxury trains are luxurious to the last syllable. Though the luxury trains are not the essence of Indian travel but they are not to be ignored as they are an important source of revenue as many tourists come to India to enjoy the ride and tour circuits like Rajasthan and the Deccan Plateau.

The Indian Railways is one amongst the largest employers in the world. However, there are scores of others who earn a living on the innumerable trains. The trains and Railway stations become business grounds to numerous vendors- licensed and otherwise. No Railway story will ever be complete without mentioning them. Bond writes how his barber told him the story of a person who started off by selling glasses of cold water to passengers in the Delhi station and then went on to open a teashop and even two big restaurants in the city (59). Though such success stories are hard to come by outside the diegetic universe, yet it does not lessen the fact that many manage to earn a bare minimum from the trains.

Theroux, Ghosh, Rajesh and Bond all devote copious number of pages to the hawkers and their wares. The most common merchandise brought for sale is food stuff. The loud and recurrent calls of '*chaai-caffee*' invoke in every passenger a desire for the beverage. The tea vendors are unperturbed that trains are about to leave yet give away tea cups and even manage to do monetary transactions with people seated within never losing the balance of their wares. Tea stalls in platforms are a one- man show where the owner goes across the length of the train selling the tea while his stall stands unattended, undisturbed. Bond describes the tea seller as a small, shriveled up man wearing greasy clothes, a description that fits many (55).

Other food items commonly sold include fruits, curds and lemon, betel leaf preparation, *papads*, hot snacks, cold drinks, ice-cream ('chackobar' and 'badderscatch'), and sweets. Agra Pethas, Belgaum Kundas and Lonavala Chikkis are a prime attraction in the trains plying through these areas— a relief to the passengers that though they missed touring the city they could at least catch hold of the famous sweetmeats. Ghosh too writes how in Itarsi he saw that as the trains come by, even if it is midnight, small business setups function in the platform. *Puris* and *chholey* are freshly prepared as each train arrives and brings new customers with it. The customers are few at the odd hours, but such stalls are a great relief to those who missed dinner.

There is no end to what can be sold on trains and platforms. Commodities like newspapers to wooden toys are displayed transforming the Railway spaces to bazaars. The vendors are lucky that the trains get late and people are tempted to buy things to do away the boredom of waiting (Bond 203). The protagonist of Bond's story *The Night Train at Deoli* is amused to see a girl selling baskets in the station at night (53).

People often do not prefer buying from vendors on trains as the product quality is often disputable and hence the

hawkers barely manage to rake in a living. Railways in 2016 proposed that only licensed hawkers will be permitted on trains and platforms and will be supervised and given instructions on hygiene and cleanliness. This will restrict the number of hawkers and also ease passenger concerns about safety and quality of products. In 2017, the railway administration started a drive to remove illegal hawkers in Mumbai stations to prevent another instance of a stampede like at Elphinstone. Such measures from Railways can affect a lot of people who sell their wares across trains. But anti-social ills like theft and kidnapping from trains and platforms force the authorities to take stringent measures, thus affecting even the innocent vendors.

The Indian Railways is in a constant bid to update itself and improve its services. The latest big step in the domain of catering was introducing the E-catering system. The enterprise is not novel, only the system has slightly changed. Ghosh chronicles the presence of hotels like Hotel Neelam in Itarsi, one of the biggest railway junctions of India. The hotel has been delivering meals ordered through phones right up to the seats of passengers travelling on trains for years. The hotel became so popular that many became regular customers preferring Neelam's meals over the railway meals. The prospect of delivered food even on trains amused many and thus chose to exercise the option. Pamphlets with the menu and numbers are distributed on trains a little while before the station reaches. By then customers can give orders and piping hot food reaches them on their seats.

However, Ghosh quotes Rajesh, the man behind the eatery's success, who says that the business comes under threat because many long distance running trains were no longer stopping at Itarsi. The town had its existence due to the railways and depended on the passengers and trains for its business. Earlier, stations like Itarsi and Mughal Sarai and others were important junctions in the country and were fundamental in giving a short respite to the travelers from the long journey. But with the self sufficient coaches and pantry cars and e-catering services, the significance of stations like Itarsi is waning. The stations get no representation in the national frame if not for the Railways. "The Railways no longer need these junctions, but the towns that have grown around the junctions badly need the Railways" (54).

Today, MNC giants like McDonald's and Dominos have entered the catering business and deliver even on trains. The IRCTC's e-catering service was initiated in 2015, yet received mixed reviews from the public. In a bid to attract more people, the organization now offers meals from McDonald's, KFC, Switz Foods, Only Alibaba, Dominos, Haldiram, Bikanerwala, Nirulas, Sagar Ratna and Pizza Hut. The initiative commenced in 2017 and was introduced in the premium trains in select stations. IRCTC however hopes to expand the enterprise and since 2015 has even started phasing out pantry cars in long distance trains which have always been criticized over the quality of food. The e-catering initiative not only reflects a new, internet nation but also our changing food practices—paving way to MNCs to get a firm hold in every domain of the country. While the option is feasible to the middle and higher strata of the society, the larger community still strives hard to make a living, let alone having a secure internet connection to order pizzas or *chicken makhni*.

The physicality of the Railways led to visions and imaginations and hence representations of it in visual and textual media, thus emphasizing the influence it had on people's lives (Kerr 291). *Train to Pakistan* and *Ladies Coupe* were works that brought the trains to limelight yet their respective themes of Partition and feminist concerns, overshadowed the trains and the journey itself. The mammoth network that the Indian Railways is, sprawling over 151,000 km of laid track and connecting one billion people justifies that the Railways must be seen more than a vehicle but an entity in itself.

The writings on Indian Railways reveal how trains carry samples of the nation's diverse population and the conduct observed within its narrow corridors is not markedly different from the behaviour displayed outside its boundaries. Trains become a unique public space where the individual identities of the myriad passengers are discerned through the performance of the passengers—even in the domain of food consumption, with food practices becoming major indicators of social, cultural and economical identities. The innumerable instances about conversations and

observations on food culture in the trains duly recorded by the authors show how important an aspect food becomes to determining the positions of communities within the larger social setup.

It is interesting to note that though Indian Railways has certain homogeneous elements across the nation-coaches, platform structures, and announcement services etc., apart from accommodating the regional languages, the IRCTC ensured that the regional cuisine was served in the trains that traversed through the various zones, emphasizing the importance of food to the travelers. The trains thus further reinforce the cultural practices of the different places. Indian Railway food industry assumes importance due to its economic impact and the multiple forms in which it manifests itself. Updated services like e-catering and the entry of the giant MNCs into the Railway catering system is a sure threat to the small scale business setups, vendors and even hotels who have been sustaining themselves by delivering food to the innumerable passengers.

Indian Railways in its 166 years has seen numerous trends in the domain of food culture—the rich Imperialist dining experiences paving way to home-cooked meals carried along by passengers, to the ever criticized IRCTC services, and to the current e-catering services. The Indian Railways will keep witnessing the rapid changes related to food consumption and also every changing aspect of Indian lifestyle. The Railways too will keep updating to pander to the needs of its customers, who unfortunately are increasingly opting for air travel.

The Indian Railways thus becomes a gigantic text in itself where multiple domains associated with it, especially the socio-cultural factors, have largely remained unexplored. Food is just one aspect and even within it, much more can be explored on the politics of catering and consumption, the stark difference between services of premium-luxury trains and regular trains which are solely dependent on the economic position of its passengers etc. The Railways will always be a source of fascination and will show within itself the paramount changes that will keep happening in India.

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