

## RailBandhu >

# The Journey Is The Destination

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My fondest memories of my childhood are centred around one particular train journey that my family would repeat each year during Diwali. To place this story in context I must give you a historical perspective. Please bear with me while the story goes into flashback.

Even though I was born and brought up in Mumbai, my roots lie in Rajasthan. My ancestors were traders in the town of Narnaul—located in Haryana—who eventually shifted base to Marwar over a century ago. My great-grandfather was a railway guard stationed in Jodhpur. He was a man of modest means but was immensely respected in town.

One of his sons—my grandfather—had a strong entrepreneurial streak and branched out as a businessman. Starting with a small general merchandise shop he eventually went on to become a supplier of Rolls-Royce motorcars to the Rajput princes. He soon built a new mansion that he named after my great-grandfather and proceeded to populate it with an ever-growing family of sons and daughters.

My grandfather did not live a very long life but during his lifetime he made his brothers and his sons relocate to different parts of India so that the family business could be expanded geographically. This eventually resulted in various members furthering the family business in Jodhpur, Jaipur, Ajmer, Udaipur, Indore, Bhopal, Kota, Delhi and Mumbai. My father was established in Mumbai as part of this grand design.

My grandmother was a frail old woman who had quietly and efficiently managed her growing flock while her husband had been busy building a fortune. After she became a widow, she had only one request to make of her children. She wanted that they should all agree to spend every Diwali in the house that her husband had built in Jodhpur. It would be the family's way of reuniting each year in remembrance of the man who had given them so much.

And so it was that my family would make the journey each year to Jodhpur—almost akin to a sacred pilgrimage. We would board a train at Bombay Central Station (yes, it was Bombay and not Mumbai in those days) that would take us to Ahmedabad. From Ahmedabad we would board another train to Falna, a nondescript railway junction where a car and driver awaited us. The drive from Falna to Jodhpur was a little over two hours and would be productively spent consuming mouth-watering onion Kachoris, thoughtfully packed into the car by my grandmother.

My father's family was a contingent of five—dad, mom, my elder brother and sister, and I. All five of us would share a four-berth compartment in the First AC section of the train. Inevitably it would lead to squabbling between us kids regarding who occupied which space. When we would approach my mother for dispute resolution, she would simply smile and tell us that one day we would look back at the journey and wish that we could relive the moment. We, in turn, would stare at her, utterly convinced that she was stark raving mad.

Sometimes the air-conditioning in our compartment would prove inadequate during the Gujarat-Rajasthan stretch and my father would launch into a description of how a block of ice had to be placed in a large tub in the centre of the compartment during the 'good old days' when there was no air-conditioning in First Class. It would now be my dad's turn to be stared at by the kids.

My mother would always organize a great big stainless steel tiffin carrier containing aloo-puri, namkeen and pickles. It would be wiped clean by the end of the journey, awaiting a fresh injection of goodies from my grandmother for the return journey. My mother would tell us stories about how her father had imported a special tiffin carrier from England that accommodated hot coals in the bottom compartment in order to keep the food extra hot. Apparently he had been so excited about his contraption on his first journey with it that he had spilled the burning embers on the floor of the compartment and created quite a fire panic. Some years later when The Burning Train—a Bollywood flick starring Dharmendra and Vinod Khanna—was released, we kids would joke that real perpetrator of the crime had been our maternal grandfather.

The tradition of travelling to Jodhpur each year continued for the entire joint family of my grandmother until the year she passed away. My eldest uncle tried to keep the tradition alive and insisted that everyone reach Jodhpur the next year. Unfortunately he had not realized that my grandmother had been the glue holding the fragile family together. The reality was that all of us had gone our separate ways and business dissensions had reached the point where they could no longer be brushed under the proverbial rug. It was the beginning of the end.

I remember celebrating Diwali for the first time in Mumbai that year. It felt rather odd. In Jodhpur we would be over a dozen cousins running all over the place. The family house in Jodhpur was built on a vast estate that included the mansion, guesthouse, gardens, cowsheds, stables and a polo ground. In Mumbai, it was just three kids trying to make the best of a cramped south Mumbai flat. There was no train journey to be made because there was no one awaiting our arrival at the destination. There was no tiffin carrier to be prepared, there were no stories to be told and there were no scuffles to be had over berth allocations. It was no longer the beginning of the end. It was the end.

Many years later I was with my wife and son on a train journey from London's Waterloo station to the Lake District. It was a picturesque view from the window. Inside, the train was impeccably clean and organized. As we sipped Ginger Ale and nibbled on bourbon cream biscuits my son pestered me with questions about our destination. I answered his questions mechanically but my mind wandered off to a simpler time—one when the journey used to be the destination.