

Visual Ethnography of a Mumbai Local Train

Visual Communication | Special Project

Submitted for the partial fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Masters of Design in Visual Communication at the
Industrial Design Centre,
Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay)

Guide: Prof. Nina Sabnani

Radhika Gujar | 08625802

Certificate

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Guide _____

Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources.

I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/ source in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

Signature: _____

Name of the student: _____

Roll No.: _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to my guide Professor Nina Sabnani who has been extremely patient and helpful in guiding this project. Her guidance has been invaluable and has always boosted my confidence.

I would like to thank all my friends who have accompanied me on the endless train trips of mine.

I would also like to thank my family for their support.





Anywhere in mumbai people live very close and practically on the railway lines.

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Visual Ethnography

Ethnography is the description of the customs of people and cultures. (Oxford dictionary) . Visual ethnography is an extention of the same with an addition ie the way of expressing the study carried out in ethnography. Visual representaton of the ethnographic study includes photography, film making, illustrations etc.

Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson define ethnography as a particular method or a set of methods that:

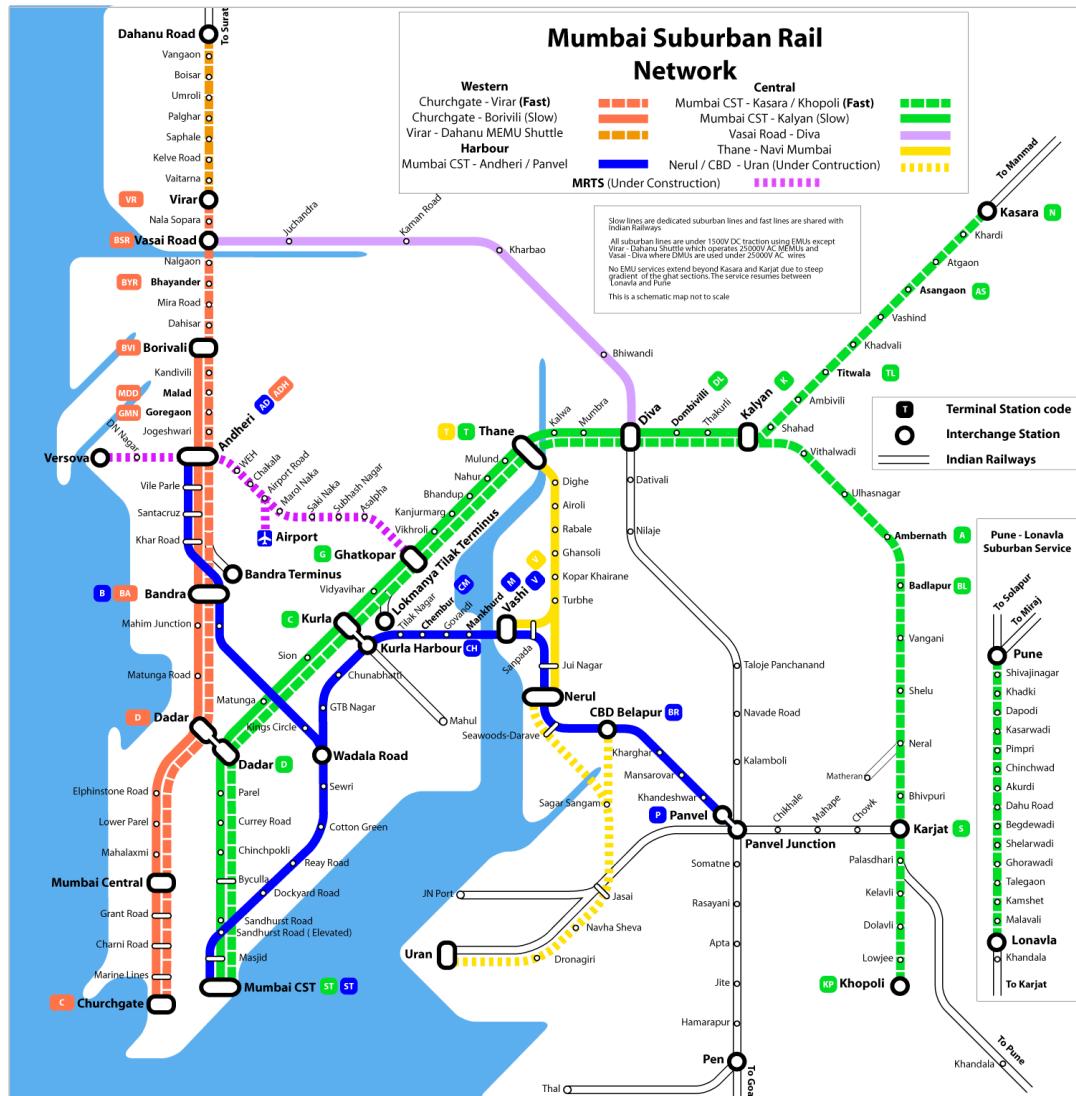
'involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in peoples' daily lives for an extenden period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions infact collecting data is available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.'

Visually studying the culture of a paricular area or class of people will give a person a fair idea of how those people live, what are their tastes and habit or how they have adapted themselves to the situations that occur in the same space.

Visual Ethnography of women traveling in a local train is the study of the behavior, actions, daily life, incidents and space of women commuters. To carry out this study I have made use of photography, graphical illustrations, and the written language.



Mumbai Local:



Map from : http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mumbai_suburban_rail_map.png, Downloaded on: 11th April, 2010.

Everyday, people travel in Mumbai. Around 6.9 million people commute across Mumbai for work. They use the most convenient mode of public transport the Mumbai Local Trains or 'the Locals' as they are popularly known

Some Information on the 'Locals':

The Mumbai Suburban Railway system carry more than 6.9 million commuters on a daily basis and this constitutes more than half of the total daily passenger capacity of the Indian Railways itself.

Rush hour: Towards south Mumbai in the morning and toward north Mumbai in the evening. The rush hour is known as the super dense crush load period.

Trains arrive at each platform every 3 minutes. Every train stops on each station for about 20 to 30 sec. only.

The Mumbai railway system is highly efficient and is known in the world for its low accident rate. There has been not even one collision of the 'Locals' in the living memory.

During the super dense crush load hours the local trains carry around 4500 and more passengers in one train. 99 trains ply in a 3 hour period during the Super dense crush load hours.

A large part of these commuters are women. The Mumbai local trains are the first in the world to have two separate reserved compartments on every train. No. 9 and No. 12 compartment are the women's compartment.

History

The first passenger railway train in the east ran between 21 miles (34 km) of Bombay and Thane on 16 April, 1853.

The Mumbai Suburban Railway, as well as Indian Railways, are an offshoot of this first railway to be built by the British in India. The Mumbai railway system is also the oldest railway system in Asia.



Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) also known as VT (Victoria terminus - old name)





Abstract

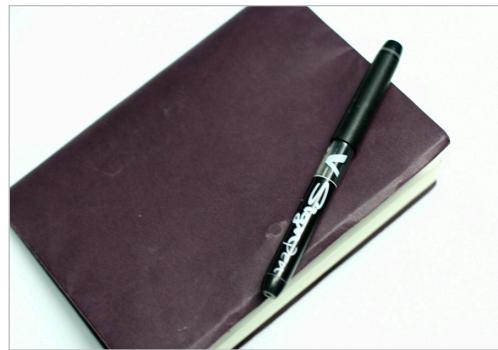
This is a document of what I have seen, experienced and heard when I traveled on the No. 9 compartment of the Mumbai Local trains.

There are many things about the *Locals* that surprise me every time I travel in one. There are so many interesting people that you meet in the compartment. They are friends who meet only in the locals, who share their lives for the time they travel together and then go their own way.

There are many incidents that made me want to do visual ethnography such as experiencing a “*bhajan*” group (groups which sing religious songs) in a men’s compartment, hearing of groups of men who meet on the same local everyday so as to play cards, Women who have formed groups in the train and have kitty parties which are named after the time or number of the local trains etc. I wanted to see this different world and experience every bit of it.

When I started going by train I realised that it was too vast a subject to cover so I started concentrating on the women’s compartment only and that’s when I realised that its a small world in itself and had many kinds of incidents that I could write on.





Methodology

To conduct the ethnographic study I used the following tools.

Observing while Traveling

I have taken the *Local* from Kanjur Marg station to last destination on the central line i.e. Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST aka VT for its old name Victoria Terminus) and from Andheri station to Churchgate station on the western line. I have also travelled on the Harbor line from Vashi to Kurla, and then the train, due to Sunday Mega Block, changes over to the central line.

Sunday Mega Block (this is a block created on various lines to carry out repair work on the railway lines)

Photography

Photography is my way of visually representing the area of ethnography. Photography helps one to relate with the situation directly and helps to visualise it better.

Writing in a daily diary

This was an essential tool during my train journeys to CST and back as the conversations or the sounds that I could not capture through my camera were put on paper or roughly sketched out to be used later as a reference to remember the events in the trains as well as the train number or the women I spoke to etc.

Sketching and graphics

Sometimes instead of writing things down I tried to sketch the situation I was in or represent the events of that day in the form of a graphically composition.

Time travelled in the locals

Morning

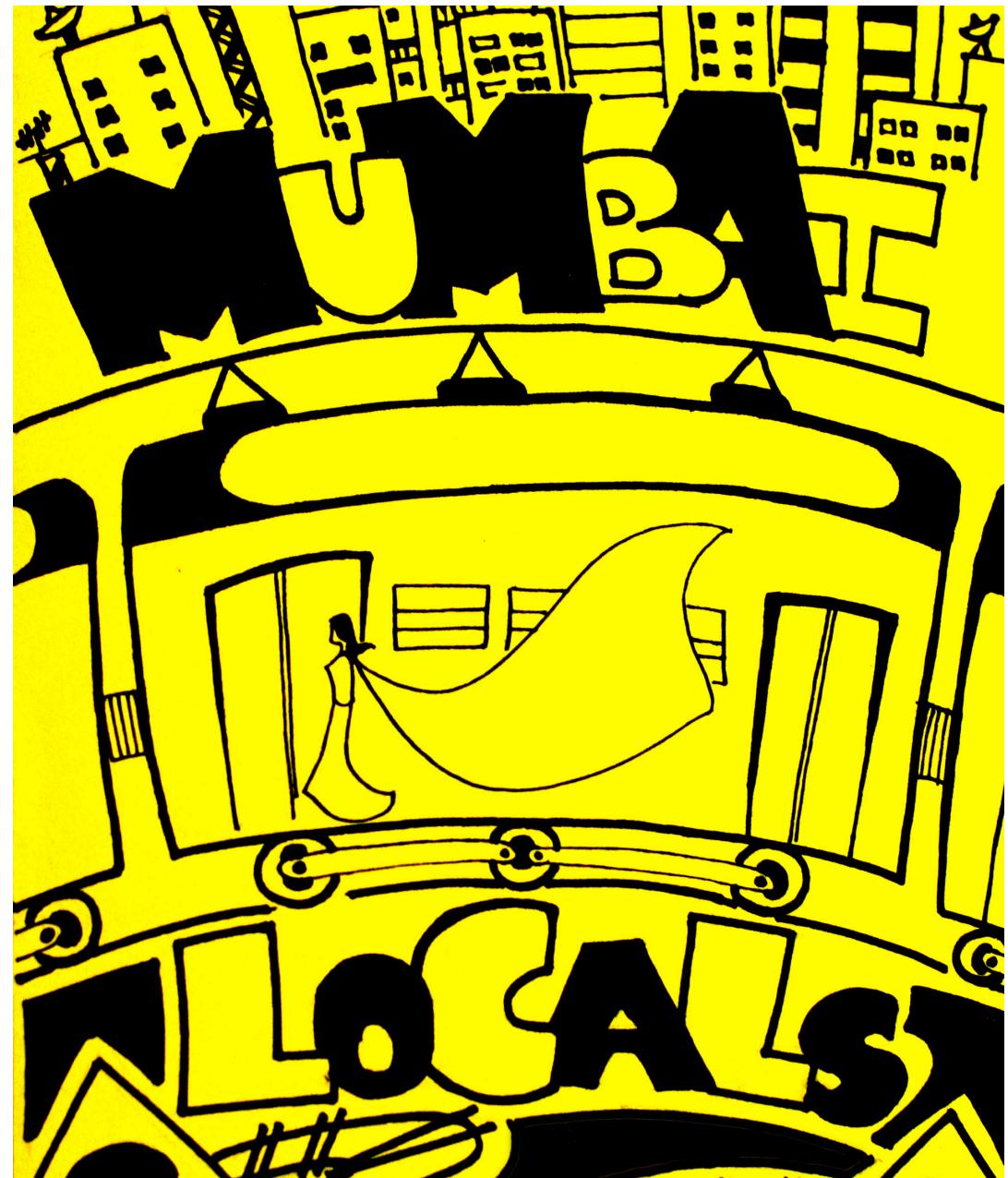
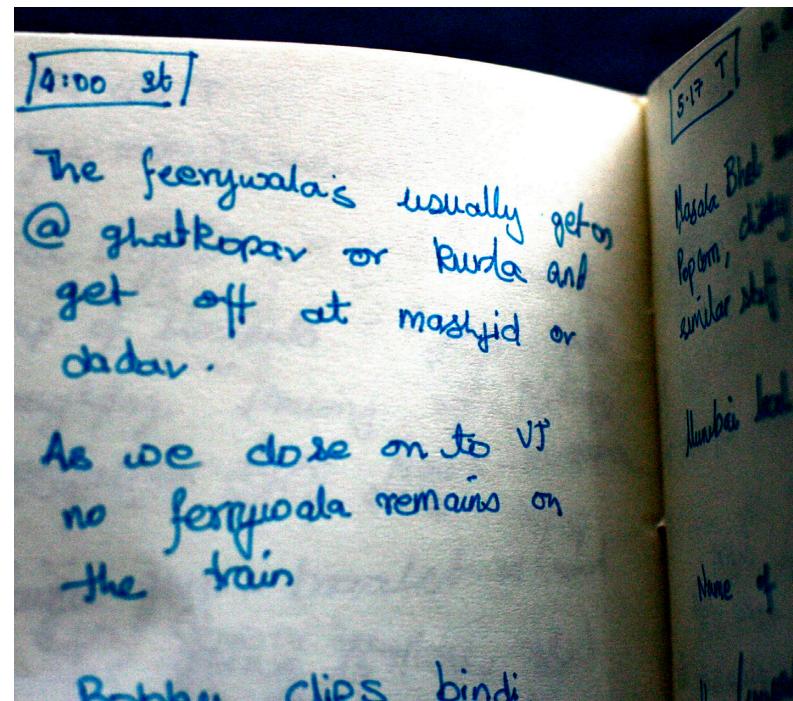
5:30 am, 9 am, 10 am, 10:30 am

Afternoon

11:30 am, 1:30 pm, 3:30 pm

Evening

6 pm, 7 pm, 8 pm, 9 pm, 10 pm









Life on the Line

Just one travel on the Mumbai locals has made me wonder how many Mumbaikars live their lives on the lines that run right from the heart of the city to the suburban areas.

Many women spend close to 2 to 3 hours in the locals in one day. In a city like Mumbai where there is always a crunch for time even 2 to 3 hours seems like a waste but like a true Mumbaikars these women make best of any time they get.

When you enter a woman's compartment its like a small world of its own. Women love to make use of this free time that they get away from the family and the office hassles.

This is the time they get to gossip, shop, read, pray, quarrel with total strangers, call up close relatives, sort the vegetables, catch a wink, talk to their friends about their lives, husbands and mother-in-laws etc.

During the rush hours there is no space to stand yet women find a space maybe a station or two later, make space for their friend, colleague, child to sit and start making most of their space and time.

Some teachers grade question papers, sort them, some women are documenting their office work, young girls from colleges study, mothers pick up their kids from school, some are sorting vegetables to cook at home or even buying them from vegetable sellers on the train.

Some women spend time by reading a holy book and praying, listening to music, Gossiping, complaining about one thing or another, singing '*bhajans*' or holy songs with a group of women, shopping nik-naks from the hawkers, reading novels, eating, fighting for space, calling up loved ones, etc.





For women on the local train there is always something to do. If not they are brooding away, looking at the stations whizzing by, just feeling the rush of energy induced by the locals.

Boys until a specific age are allowed to travel in the ladies compartment of the trains. Also male hawkers are seen in the locals selling their goods. Other than them if a man even by mistake gets on to the ladies compartment he is either beaten up or if the train is not too fast pushed out of the train.

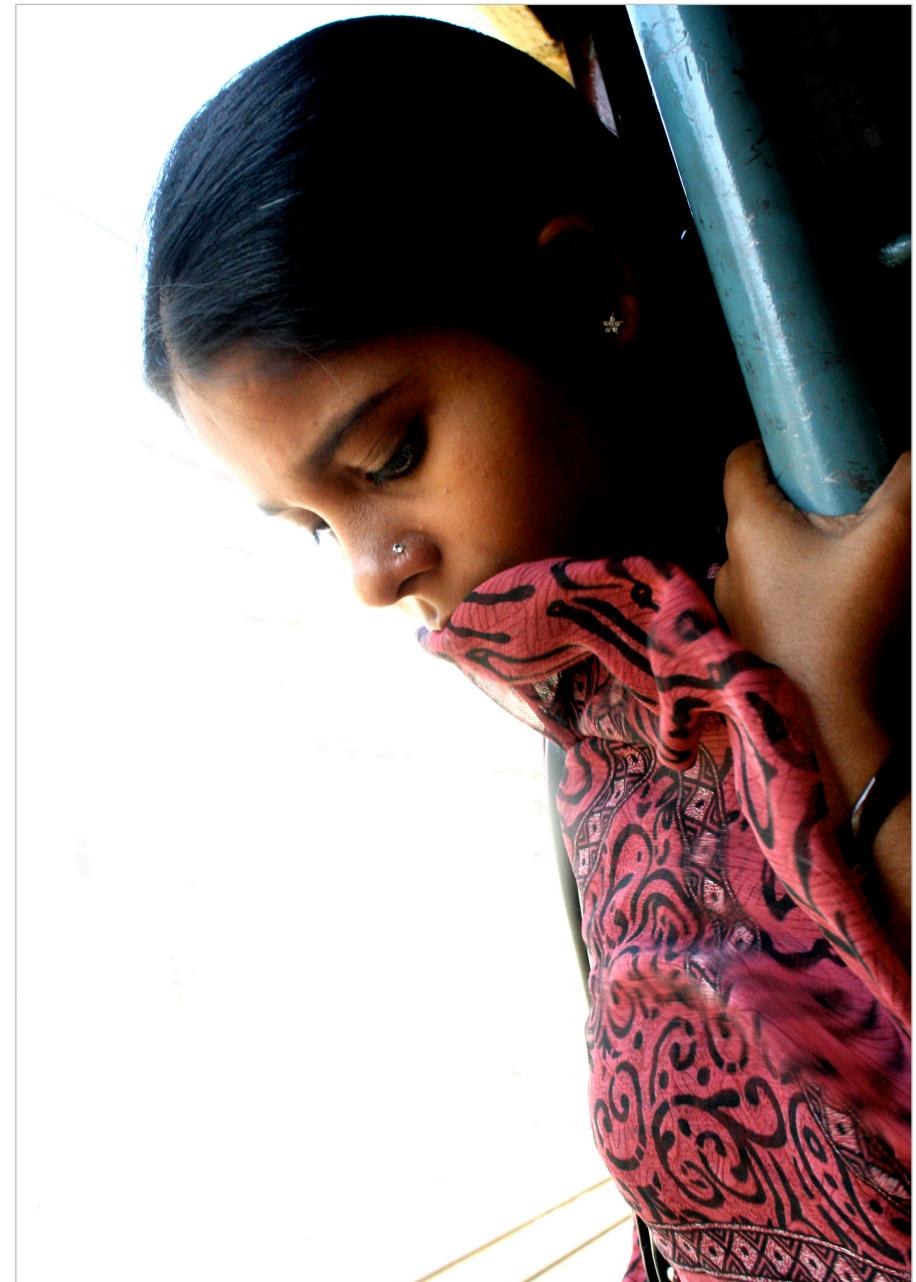
Even the ticket collectors are women in this compartment. They are equally tough on violators and they are always in plain clothes. So beware!













‘Way-finding’ in the locals



Just standing on the platform and watching a rush hour train and the crowd may scare someone who is new to the Mumbai Local but not the Mumbaikars. For them it seems just so easy and a day-to-day thing to get on to a rush hour train.

They have their ways of getting in, getting a place to sit and getting out. That is their trick of the trade. These ways are set and you have to learn them fast. If you don't then you may not be able to catch the right train, will have to stand all the way for a long distance or may not be able to get off.

Lets begin with the train, platforms, the timing and the final destination.

The digital display for a train will always read as the time the train will arrive on the station, and destination. For e.g. 9:40 ST meaning the train will arrive on the station at 9: 40 am and is heading towards CST (Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus popularly known as VT – Victoria Terminus)

If you still find it confusing to locate the train, the number of compartments will it have, where will they stop at on the platform, and the train's final destination, it is always better to ask someone and then double check it.

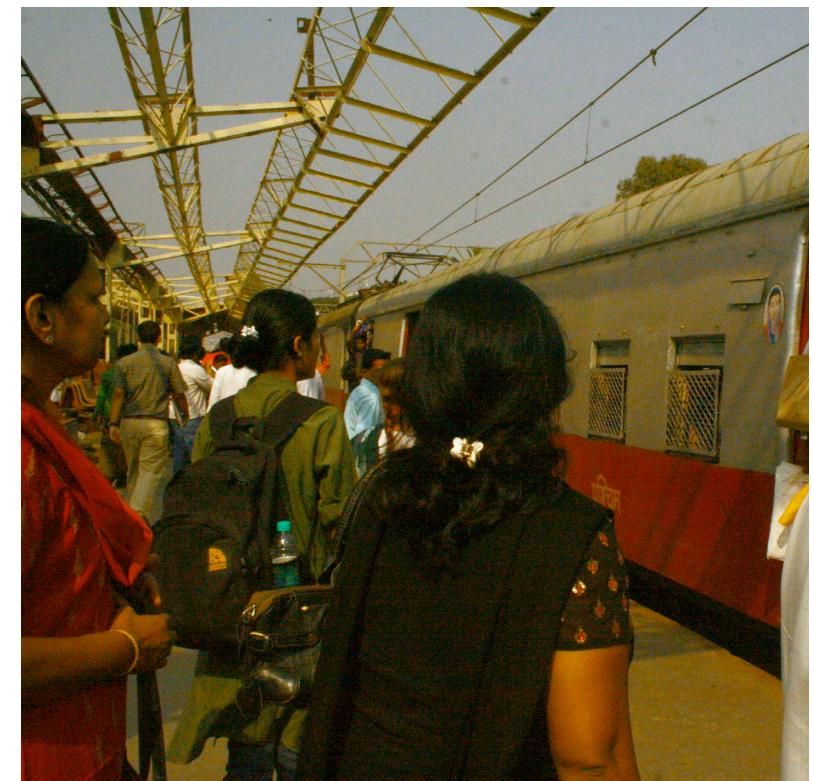




The platforms:

On most of the smaller stations Platform No. 1 (for trains going towards north Mumbai) and No. 2 (for trains going towards south Mumbai) are for the slow trains which stop at all stations, and similarly No. 3 and No. 4 are for the fast locals, which stop at only select or the more important stations.

On the bigger stations e.g. at CST it is advisable to look at the digital displays and recheck by asking someone. At CST mostly platform no. 1, 2, 3 are for the western line and 4, 5, 6 are for the central line.



Getting in the train:

This is the most difficult part during rush hours. There are some ways to get in the train without loosing your bag, shoes or any other belongings.

When the train arrives on the platform go to one side of the exit of the compartment. Hold your bags, purses, and luggage in front of you so that it goes into the train before you do.

Let the women in the train get out first only after that will you get a chance to get on other wise you will be pushed out.

Hold the rod at the center of the exit firmly. Get a good foothold on the edge of the compartment. Lever your self in. While doing this you may have to push someone ahead but don't mind it as all the lady in front will do is give you a bad look and move on. Time crunch you see!

Now hold you bag tight. And shove people ahead. Ask about your destination and which side will the platform arrive. If the station is one or two stations away then do not bother to sit down. Start making your way to the side that the platform will arrive on.

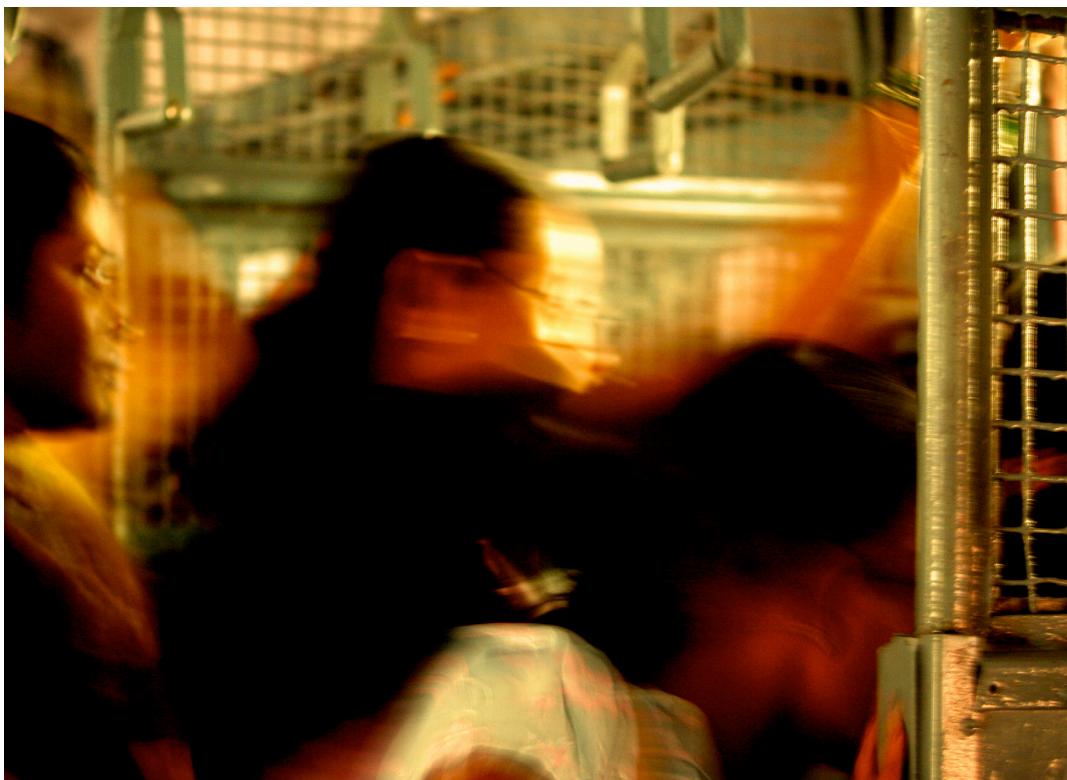
There may be women getting of at stations before your station! Do give them space to go ahead. Don't block them.

Now if your station is really far away then try to go inside the aisle and ask around for the first person to get off. Reserve an exchange of seat with that person.

Sit down and enjoy your ride. To get out is equally tactful.



Getting off the train:



Ask around for the station that arrives before your destination.

Get up one station before and make your way to the line of women who would be getting down at that particular station. If you can't get close to the exit, Don't fret, get into the line.

People will push you from behind and make sure you can get down. If you are the last person in the queue then start pushing once the train is really slow and about to stop. DO NOT push earlier as this may result in the person at the start of the line being pushed out and falling down.

In Mumbai you have to fight for everything even to get off the train. Don't give the women climbing up any space of you might not be able to get down.

Ground rule: Hold your luggage in front of you all the time so that it comes with you when you get off and is also safe from the pickpockets.







The '*pherrywallas*'

(The hawkers in the Mumbai Local trains)

The No. 9 compartment of the local train is like a mini shopping mall where you get anything and everything. Hawkers who sell goods in the trains are locally known as '*Pherrywalla's*'. These '*Pherrywalla's*' have a life that revolves around this lifeline that runs across Mumbai.

They sell goods everyday, from morning to evening, in two batches one is from 7 to 11 in the morning and 5 to 11 at night. They have a daily earning and selling business in which they buy goods from another person at loan or from the previous days earnings and then sell the goods with a small profit margins.

Some of these hawkers have set businesses and some have weekly changing ones. There are women and men of different sections of society and castes who hawk in the trains. In my travel in the train I have seen hawkers from varied backgrounds selling different goods.

I have seen women from very low income groups to middle class women, a 5 year old girl to an 75 year old gujrathi woman, and also different age groups of boys selling things. There are some women hawkers who are loud and rude but some are sweet and convincing. There is a stark difference in their ways of selling.





Sheela Tai

A hawker by profession. My introduction to her was quite an interesting incident.

On my second ride on the train for this project I was clicking pictures from KanjurMarg to CST. Unaware of my knowledge she was observing me as a suspect all the way. When the Train stopped at CST she got out and informed the police. The police came after me to ask me who I was and what was I doing. I showed them my IIT card. They then told Sheela Tai that I was no terrorist and posed no threat.

She apologized profusely to me and after that we got talking. She told me that the police had warned the hawkers about a bomb threat. Also she said in exchange for their services to the police they were allowed to sell goods on the train. Hawking in the trains is illegal and a hawker caught on the train either has to pay a heavy bribe, fine or appear before the railway magistrate. In her business there are no room for mistakes as either of them costs a lot of money and results in a days work and money down the drain.

She then started talking about other subjects like how living in Mumbai had become expensive and due to this she had to cut down here favorite way pass time while waiting for the train i.e. to have a '*cutting*' or a tea served by the roadside in glasses.

She told me that she lived in Dombivalli with her mother. Also that she does her work in two shifts and for which she has to get out of the house by 5:30 in the morning. She then travels on the Virar - Churchgate line selling packets of sweets, imli goli, and other sweet and sour tidbits for women to eat on the train journey. These range from 5 rupees to 15 rupees a packet.

At around 10:30 she then catches a train to CST from Kurla. She goes to CST everyday to pick up the stock from another lady for the evening and next day morning. She then takes the train back home by getting off at Mashjid Bandar and changing lines.

One thing that keeps her going in the day to work is the hot meal waiting for her when she gets back home. Her mother still cooks food for her and that is what she loves the most in her daily routine.

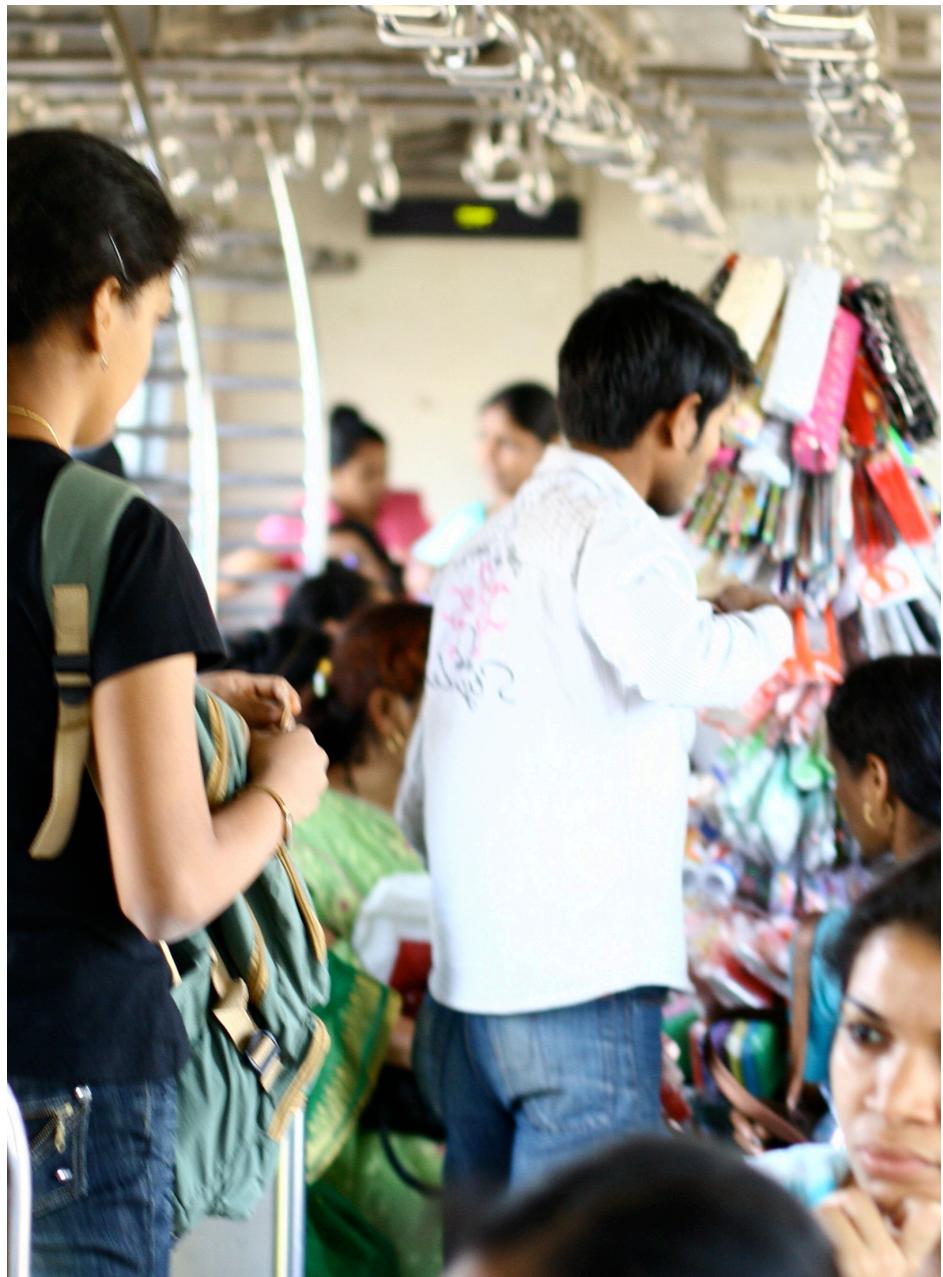
While parting she said “ *aamcha dhanda ani amche ayushya ya rula var chalatat. He banda tar paise banda mhanun amhala savadhan rhaila lagta. Mala maaf kar tai tuzha var aarop ghetla.*” (Our earnings and our lives depend on these two lines across Mumbai. If the locals stop the money will stop and so we have to be cautious. Please forgive me for accusing you.)

Hearing this I thought of the risks that come along earning by hawking in the train. The fear of something similar to 26/11 happening is so deep rooted in these peoples lives, yet to earn some money they have to take this risk everyday. They have to say goodbye to their families who have the questions in their minds - what if our loved ones don't return today?

These hawkers sell a wide range of products right from: gold plated jewelry – chains, bangles, earrings, mangalsutra (the wedding necklace) etc. silver looking jewelry, junk jewelry, to rubber bands, hair clips, office stationary, dress materials, cardholders, pouches and bags, vegetables, cartoon stickers, key chains, nail paints, eyeliners, and also food like bhel, imli goli, jeera goli, fried stuff, popcorn, sweets, chakli, chivda, etc.







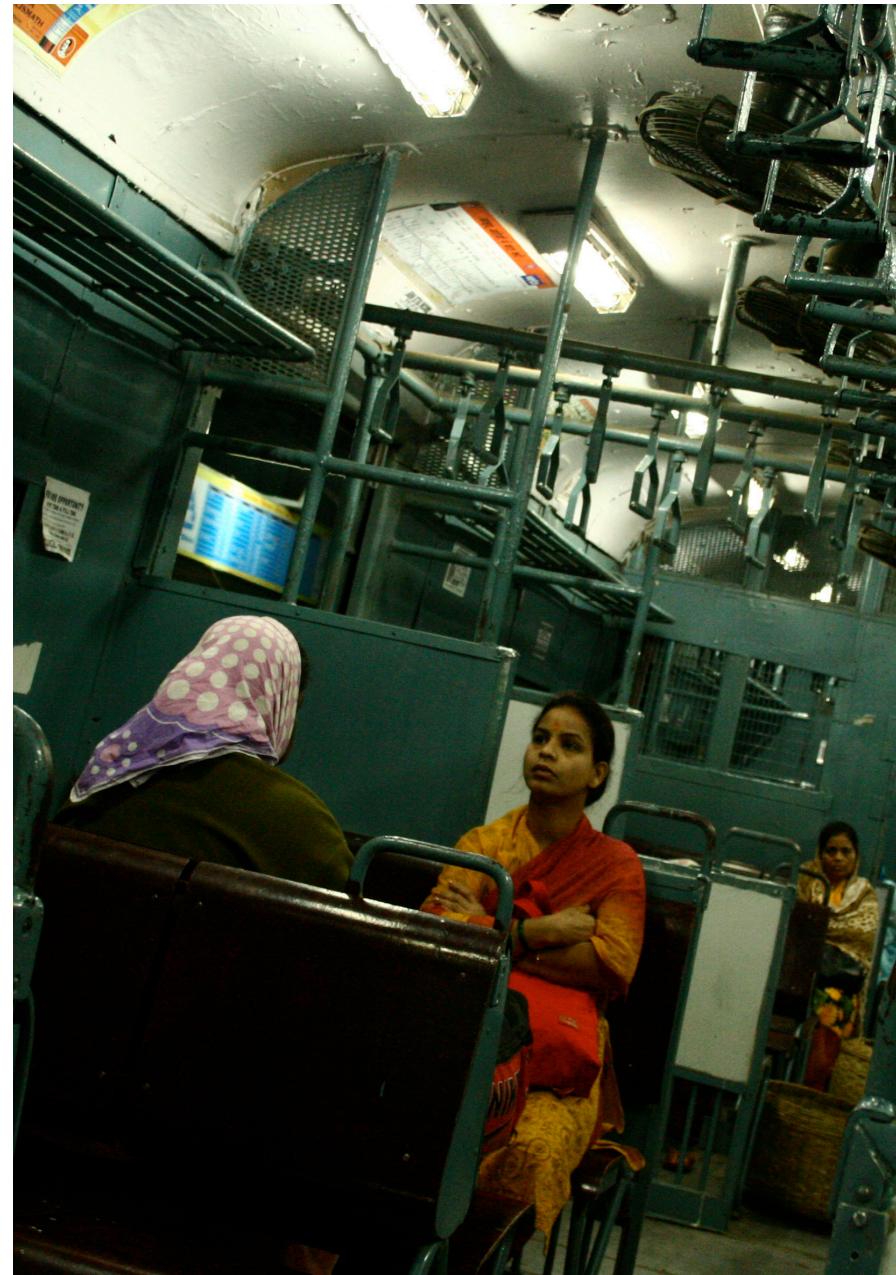


A day in the train

In Mumbai the locals start at 4 in the morning and the last local runs at 1 at night.

Dawn: 5:30 am to 7:30 am

Very early in the morning the scene in a local train is not so good. There are hardly 10 to 15 ladies in the compartment and even a lower number on the platforms. Women generally tend to sleep in the local on the way to work. This is so because women usually get up by 4 am to cook for the whole family, do all the household chores and then leave for work. This leaves them time to catch up on some rest before a long day of work. After around 6:30 to 7 the scene changes. Here the women are catching up with each other, waiting for their friends or colleagues, or in a rush to catch the first train. There is a lot of commotion in the local train at 7 o'clock. Yet there is ample space for a person to stand in the train.





Morning: 7:30 am to 11:30 am

Super Dense Crush load hour

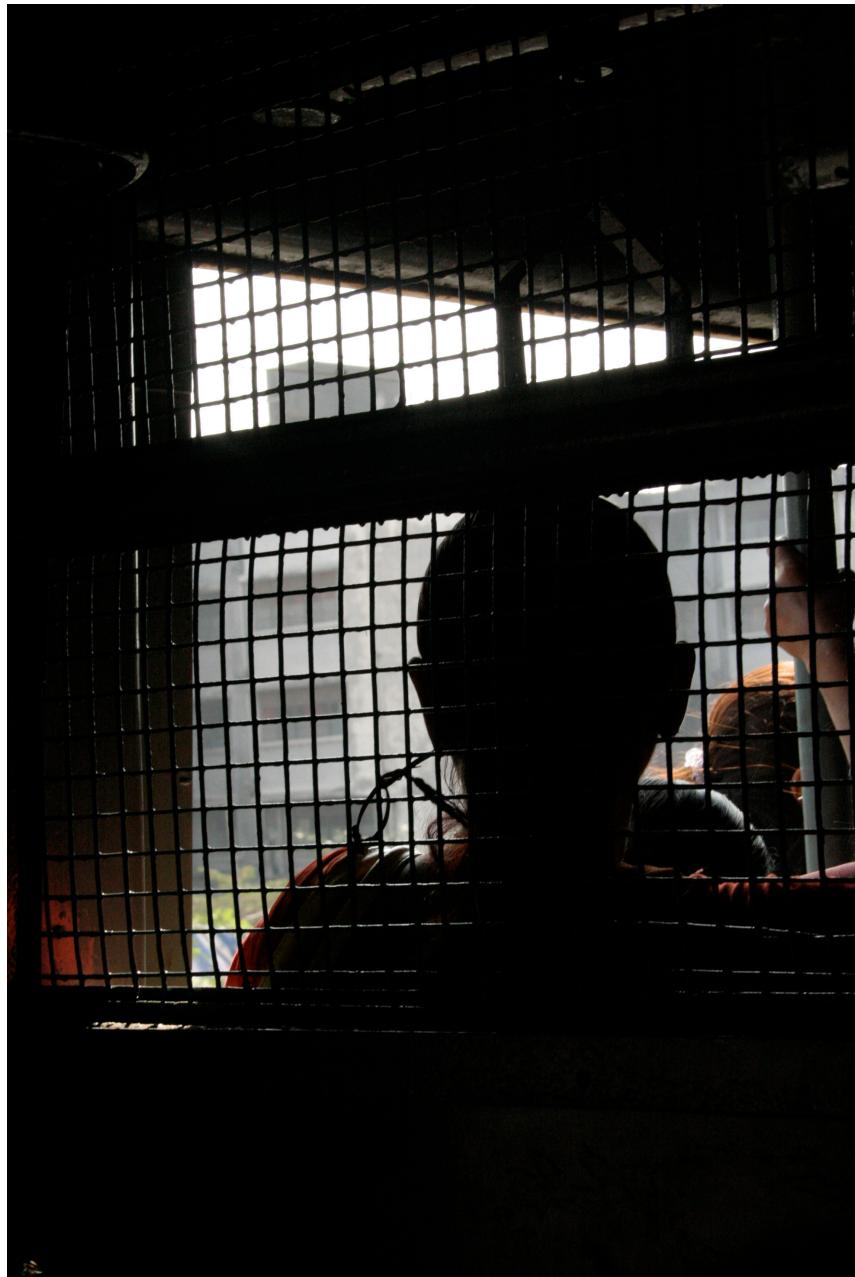
This is a challenging hour for even the regular commuters to handle. There is double the amount rush in the local. One is literally squeezed between women from all sides. One has to push and pry to make their way to the aisle. Once at the aisle the women ask around for the person who is going to get off first and reserve a seat with them. Or else women in the aisle remember the station at which women get on and then offer a seat to them. During this time there are hawkers in the train. They make their way around the crowd selling their goods and along side keeping an eye on their goods. A lot of hawkers do travel in the opposite direction to the heavy morning and evening rush. Typically seen women during this time are college going girls, Working women, etc.



Noon: 11:30 am to 4 pm

This is a lull period to the usually full of people locals trains. The trains are full but not overflowing with people. There is ample place to stand and sit. The locals are cooler than the surrounding heat and many people tend to dose off in this calm and peaceful environment of the compartment. If the train is too empty you may find women occupying the whole seat by sleeping. It is a comfortable ride to your destination. Typically seen women in this time are homemakers, old women and also some young girls who despise the congestion.





Evening: 4 pm to 8:30 pm

Super Dense Crush load hour

Evening is a very tough time for women. This is mainly so due to fatigue, irritation, workload, going back to family tensions, etc. So it is time for maximum cat fights occur as women want to go home in time and also want to be a little at peace before the work at home begins. Also it has been a long day and so women get easily aggravated.

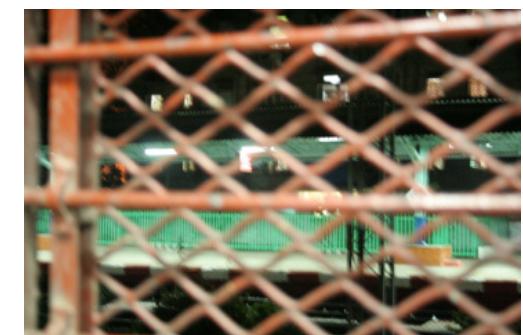
Also a lot of shopping happens in this time and so you can see many hawkers in the trains. Women tend to do some household work in the local before going back. This work would include buying sorting out vegetables, knitting, sorting paper work, etc. Women in Mumbai really know how to utilize their time efficiently. Every minute of the day is used to the maximum.



Night: 8:30 pm to 1 am

The scene in a local train after 8:30pm is quite different. There is a certain sense of uneasiness in the compartment. The number of women traveling in the locals goes on decreasing as time passes. Women sit very reserved unless they are with a friend, family member, colleague etc. It is an eerie kind of atmosphere.

This is due the cases of rape, molestation etc that have happened in the ladies compartment in the past. Also it is an atmosphere of anxiety as many women are reaching home late etc, this leads delay in their further travel. Also there is usually a policeman guarding each and every ladies compartment this adds to the already existing silence. After 11:30 most women prefer to travel with their male friend in the other compartments, as it is safer than traveling alone so the ladies compartment wears a deserted look.





Incidents that
happen in the Locals





During My train travel escapades I came across many incidents that may happen to a regular commuter.

Trains Running Late:

This is a very day-to-day phenomenon in the Mumbai Local trains scenario. When the trains run late it usually means more crowd in that a train than usual. On the very first day of my ethnographic study I happened to encounter such a situation.

Usually a there is a Local that arrives at the platform after about a span of 5 to 8 minutes but that day it had already been late by 15 minutes and would come in another 10 which meant that the train was late by a whole 25 minutes and this was a clear indication of the amount of rush in the train.

In such a scenario a woman tend to make phone calls and talk till the train arrives, a middle aged woman with a group a friends was talking about family crises or issues e.g. *"Majhi mulgi na ashich karte aai katach nahi Mhaajya sasu che bhaltech demands astat"* which means that my daughter does not listen to me on a daily basis and that her mother in law keeps on making senile demand that I cannot fulfil. Most of the women were looking down the platform to check if the train had arrived and looked back at the watch worried.

Once the train arrived it is already packed to the hilt. Women still shoved, pushed, squeezed their way into the train. There is absolutely no place to stand in the train I was stuck at the centre of the exit and as I had a backpack with me which ate up space I was severely looked down upon. I couldn't even turn myself in the direction of the seating area due to the rush.

By the time Kurla went by the train seemed to be relatively empty and I got a place to sit. All this happened in the 1:42 pm CST bound local which was a afternoon train which usually has no rush.

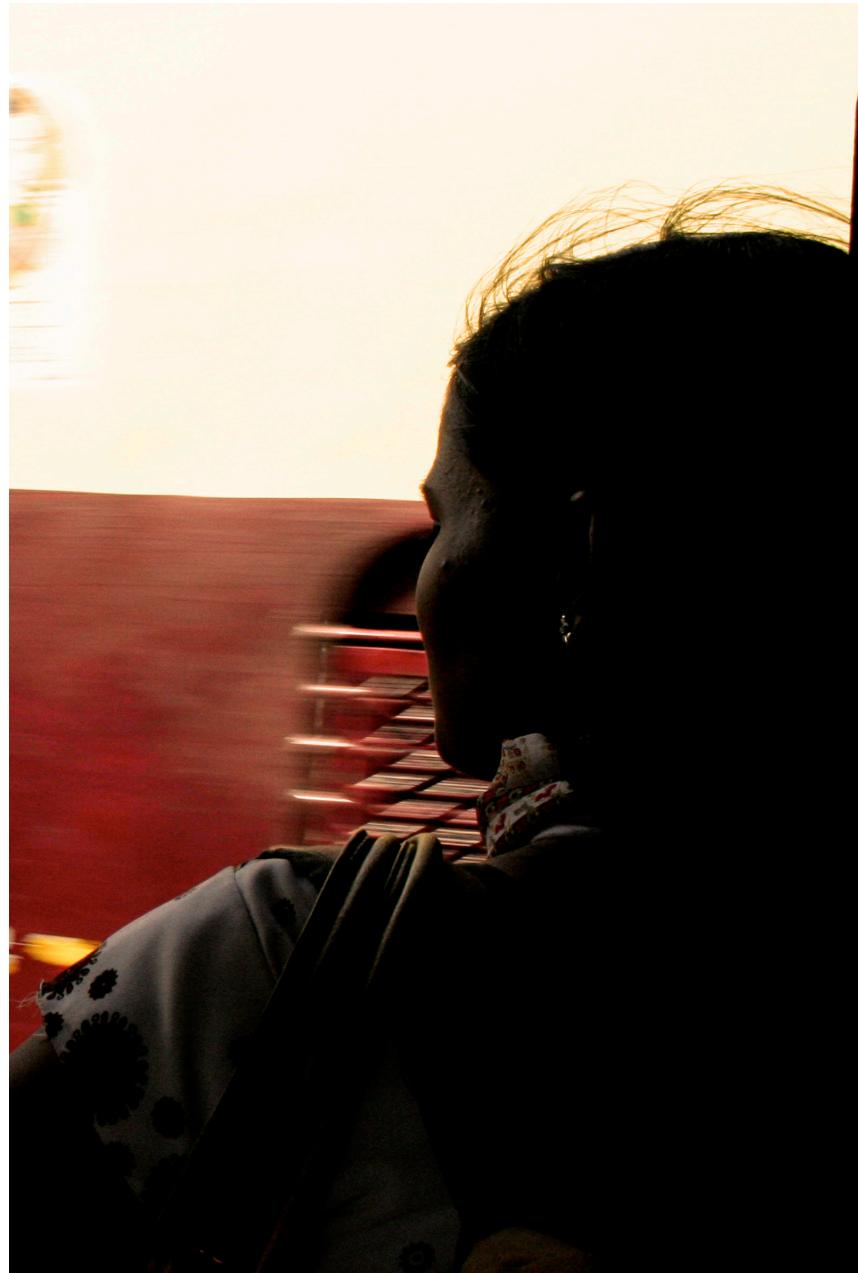
Getting questioned by a '*havaldar*'.

On my second ride on the train for this project I was clicking pictures from Kanjurmarg to CST. Unaware of my knowledge she was observing me as a suspect all the way as I was clicking images, making notes, looking back at my behavior anyone would have found it suspicious.

When the Train stopped at CST she got out and informed the police that there was a girl on the train with a big camera and was clicking photos and acting suspicious.

Till then I had taken a ticket and seeing the same train on the platform sat in the No. 9 compartment again. The police came after me to ask me who I was and what was I doing. I showed them my IIT card and told them that I was working for a news article that would appear in a newspaper in IIT. They then told Sheela Tai I was no terrorist and posed no threat.

She apologized profusely to me and we got talking.





Motormen's strike

One day during my ethnographic travel journey I got to see a total stop down of the heart beat of Mumbai. The motormen had gone on a strike at the peak hours of Mumbai. This strike was to increase the pay of the motormen and they chose a perfect time to hit.

7 o'clock in the evening is the Super dense crush load as mentioned earlier and if at this time Trains stop the there is utter chaos in the Terminus and similarly on the roads as people take to going by bus or any other vehicular traffic. This is so even though they know that the will take unknown number of hours to just get home due to Mumbai's road traffic conditions.

I left from KanjurMarg Station by the 6:10 or 6:15 train to CST this also train took a very long time to come to KanjurMarg. I should have guessed by now that something was wrong with the railway system and headed back home but instead I got on to the overfull Train and headed south.

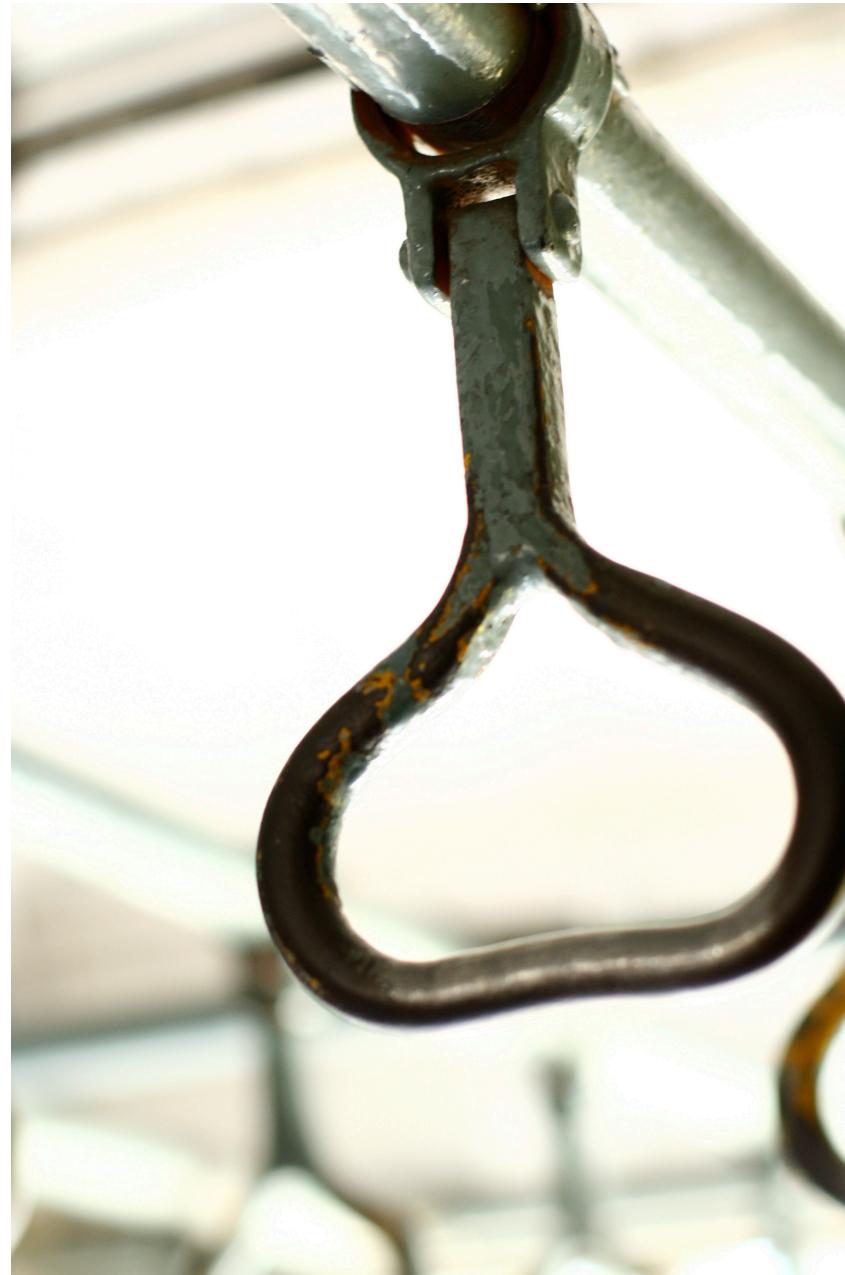
When I got to CST I got of the train and went and issued another ticket for myself and came back but to my surprise not even one train had left. I got into the train that I wanted to and waited for 15 minutes for the train to leave. I was standing at the door and was constantly pulled and pushed by the women entering and leaving the local. Women were jostling their way around with the hope that the train would leave but when it did not they went to another train.

A women next to me got a call. She said that it was the motormen's strike and no trains would be running. Even the western line would not be running now she said and left. Most of the women were very edgy. They were cursing the Motormen and also swearing at them.

Gossip was flying high in the air. After 26/11 even a small incident triggered a huge gossip section in the women's compartment and today women were especially chatty. No one wanted to get of the train due to the fear of it leaving as soon as they got off or loosing their place to sit/ stand.

At about 8:30 the strike was called off and the trains started running and all the women heaved a sigh of relief. Though the worst was yet to come. Due to the strike all the train schedules were thrown off track and now there were multitudes of women waiting at each station. The first train for them was of no use as it come highly packed from CST and there was no space to even get in.

It took about an hour and a half to get the whole system up and running. That was one harrowing experience for every woman on that CST platform.



Conclusion

Life of a woman in the local train is not easy as one may have seen yet day-in, day-out the working women of Mumbai are seen using this prime means of transportation.

Everyday the Mumbai Locals throw up challenges at them but for them it is just another part of their hectic lives, They fight, they quarrel, they yell but 2 stations later they will help the person they fought with if the need be.

Such are the women of Mumbai high spirited, energetic, friendly and enthusiastic. You will see every class of women travelling from the same No. 9 compartment. There is no caste difference when it comes to travelling, all are the same.

There is so much to learn from the women who travel everyday to make a living along with handling their family life. They are truly an inspiration.

I, through this ethnographic study, have learnt the art of behaving like a true Mumbaikar. I am more confidant of travelling by the locals. I am not shy to ask for directions, not vary of long distance travels and changing lines. I also have a new found interest of observing women and their activities in the locals of Mumbai.





