

STORY OF THE MONTH – MARCH 2014

THE LUNCH IN LUMDING JUNCTION



At the time of the story we lived in Silchar and my grandmother lived in Sylhet and visited us now and then. On this particular occasion, she arrived and expressed a desire to travel on to Tinsukia to visit her daughter's family. As I recall, this was a fairly long train journey and you had to spend a night on the train. Otherwise however the journey in those days was quite safe. Grandmother – being a fearless and self-assertive woman for her times – could accomplish it alone. But this being school summer vacation, it was decided that I would accompany her. I do not recall if this plan was for my benefit or hers. I was probably about 10 years old.

Now, there were two train changes – the first in Badarpur Junction and the other in Lumding Junction. But if you could find a place in the “through compartment” when you boarded in Silchar, you would not have to change trains in Badarpur. Only in Lumding. This was what we did.

The journey commenced as a most enjoyable one for me, what with Grandmother being indulgent whenever any vendors of tasty morsels came around. I eagerly looked forward to our arrival in Badarpur Junction. This place was famous for its shingaras (Bengali name for samosas) – oversized, with very oily, thick and crisp crust and spicy mashed potatoes inside. In the event, I was able to dispatch two of these, Grandmother choosing only a cup of tea.

The next thing to look forward to was the counting of the tunnels the train would pass through when it wended its way over the North Cachar Hills. Tunnel No. 22 was the longest. This ride was very thrilling – not so unlike the train ride from Cuzco to Machu Picchu I would later make. We arrived in Lumding Junction about noon.

There would be a couple of hours' wait before the train to Tinsukia pulled into the platform. We took our luggage and settled in one corner of the “Retiring Room.” It was, surprisingly, empty. This was the natural opportunity for lunch. Right next to the waiting room was the station canteen which served Indian snacks and sandwiches. But Grandmother wanted honest-to-goodness noon rice. This was not a problem at all. You had but to cross the railroad tracks and you found rows of ‘hotels’ (restaurants were called hotels, even if they did not provide lodgings.) The problem was, we could not both go to lunch at the same time. Somebody had to stay with the luggage. So Grandmother said she would go first, find a suitable place, eat herself and then come back and tell me where to go. She took a 10-Rupee bill from her purse, tucked it neatly in the folds of her sari at the waist and asked me to hide the purse and hold on to it. So I did. Then I engrossed myself in the adventure story I was reading about a Bengali Robin Hood named Mohan the Bandit.

About half an hour later Grandmother came back, looking happy and sated and chewing paan. Not only did she find a place which, for Rs. 4, served an excellent meal of rice, masoor dal, fried Rohu fish and goat meat curry. The proprietor was also from Sylhet, a fellow Sylheti! Now, this was a big deal. When Sylhetis outside of Sylhet met, they bonded instantly. Within a minute they would be talking about common memories of people and places. So Grandmother had a nice

long chat and told him she would pay in advance Rs. 8 for two meals. He should expect her young grandson to come shortly for lunch. Then they chatted some more and she left.

So I set out, following the directions she gave. The elderly proprietor was sitting on a low platform at the entry of the hotel, with his cash box. I told him my grandmother was just here and she had paid for my meal in advance. But then the man pretended to be very confused. He asked a couple of other people there and they said they did not know anything about this. Now I started to think Grandmother was had. I must have looked most flustered. They man then asked what I wanted to eat. I said he had been paid Rs. 4 in advance for a meal of rice, masoor dal, fried fish and goat meat curry. He then ordered a waiter to serve the Khoka Babu (Little Gentleman) that meal. It came and it indeed was delicious. After I finished, I prepared to leave. I liked the man just as my grandmother did and I wanted to say something in parting. But you did not say Thank You or Goodbye in those days, in that culture. I said, customarily: "So let me leave?" To this he replied, also customarily: "Not to leave." Then he asked me to be particularly careful crossing the railroad tracks.

I came back and reported to Grandmother that the meal was indeed everything she had said. I then went back to Mohan the Bandit. In time the train to Tinsukia arrived and we climbed into a Female Compartment (young boys were OK). This was completely empty and we were most happy at the prospect of a long journey in a compartment all to ourselves. I was looking forward to passing through stations with exotic names like Furkating and Naharkatiya.

When the train got underway and picked up speed, Grandmother prepared to have a lie-down. As she did, the folds of her sari around her waist came loose and the 10-Rupee bill fell out! I was so astounded that I could not vocalize my surprise. I simply pointed to it. And now it was her turn to be surprised. She looked most embarrassed and had a sheepish grin: "In all this friendly chitchat about Sylhet, I must have forgotten to actually pay the man. And he was too polite to call out after me! Oh what have I done to that awfully nice bald-headed man!"

"What bald-headed man?! He had a head-full of black-and-white hair."

"Surely you went to the hotel on the right hand side of the street, with the big altar of Ganesh right in front?"

"No. I went to the hotel on the left, across the street from the one with Ganesh."

Now, as I have said elsewhere, Grandmother was a fine storyteller and she especially liked to deliver her punch line with a characteristic flair. Using that same tone of voice she now said: "Hay Ma Durga! We are a fine pair of con artists. We have managed to cheat two kind-hearted men out of Rs. 8."