

TRAIN NARRATIVES: JOURNEYS, HISTORIES, AND IMAGINATIONS



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Journeys, Histories, and Imaginations

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Democratizing Indian Train Narratives: *Parithabangal's* Train Series as a Counter-Narrative to Elite-Centric Representations

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Suja Mathew

Any train journey in India, the second largest rail network in the world, is a sensory overdose and full of nostalgia. The sounds of the railway platform tea sellers in the morning, the wafting aroma of pakodas and cutlets being fried in food stalls, landscapes changing from claustrophobic urban towns to the vast countryside, the excitement of correlating the geography lessons with the station names and the river bridges that just crossed, and so much more. While the duration may seem long, the journey never did. Train travel in India has always been one big picnic. And when this entire amazing experience is accentuated by an equally enchanting visual display outside the train window, it's something that words alone cannot describe.

The Indian Railways run through some of the most scenic routes imaginable. Some of the most enchanting train journeys across the country includes the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway possibly the most popular and picturesque train journey in India and now a UNESCO World Heritage site; Nilgiri Mountain Railway - a small little cobalt blue train hooting through the lush green valleys and forests of the Nilgiris. Made popular by Shahrukh Khan and Malaika Arora dancing to the song *Chaiyya Chaiyya* (from *Dilse* movie), Nilgiri Mountain Railway was added by UNESCO to the

World Heritage List, as an extension to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.

Passing over lush green gorges of the Western Ghats and skirting through fringes of the Arabian Sea, the route of the Konkan Railway is one of the most scenic ones in India. If walking on the edge is the idea of an adventurous experience, then the train journey connecting Mandapam, to the temple island of Rameswaram, via the 2.4km long Pamban Rail Bridge, is the one. This delightful coastal journey, also termed one of the most dangerous in India, is sure to get the heart racing, as the train crosses the Palk Strait on this bridge, with views of all shades of blue beneath the floor. God's Own Country Kerala is one of the most beautiful states in the country, and when a train journey takes you on a visual journey across swaying coconut palms, over the backwaters lined by swaying paddy fields, skirting the blue ocean, one knows that this journey is bound to be a memorable one. The route from Ernakulam via Alleppey, past Trivandrum to Kanyakumari is indeed a treat to the eyes, with so much natural beauty to witness. A journey through the Thar Desert from Jodhpur to Jaisalmer, is as visually daunting as it is liberating. This journey promises to make us fall in love with the various shades of brown. One finds an immense respect for the people that call this desert their home with vibrant colors of village huts, and wild camels roaming free in a land interspersed with some shrubs and thorny bushes.

While the scenic beauty and breathtaking views outside the train offer a picturesque glimpse of India's diverse landscapes, the scenes within the closed confines of the trains and the bustling train stations tell a different story. This narrative is often marked by a

blend of chaos, humanity, and the stark realities of everyday life. These internal scenes contrast sharply with the natural world outside. For instance, the overcrowded and chaotic compartments and platforms highlights the challenging experience of navigating through bustling platforms and boarding trains; Trash and litter are common sights within the train compartments as well as on platforms raising concerns of hygiene and sanitation; catering a wide range of passengers Indian trains are a symbol of the country's economic disparities. Platform vendors, persistent beggars, theft and pickpocketing, physical safety, delayed trains and the endless waiting are some of the other common occurrences of the internal scenes of train journeys. Apart from these gritty and chaotic realities of train travel in India, the train travel also encompasses stories of adaptability, community feeling, comradeship, and diverse culture creating a microcosm of Indian society within the train compartments.

Indian cinema has a long-standing tradition of romanticizing trains and train journeys, often using them as a backdrop for pivotal scenes, songs, and climaxes. Trains are shown as symbols of adventure, romance, and destiny. Many iconic songs and climaxes of Indian movies are shot on moving trains. This shade of cinematic portrayal often glosses over the grimmer and realistic aspects of train travel. However there are movies that have a less glamorized depiction of train journeys. For instance the Irrfan Khan starring movie *The Lunchbox* provides a more grounded portrayal of Mumbai's local trains and the dabbawalas (lunchbox delivery men), highlighting the everyday reality of train travel and the popular Oscar award winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire* features

scenes that depict the perilous conditions and criminal activities associated with trains.

The franchise nature of mainstream cinema often prioritizes entertainment, romance, and drama, sometimes at the expense of more nuanced and detailed depictions of everyday realities. The rise of digital platforms has paved the way for platforms like YouTube to fill the gap in representations and provide a more comprehensive representation of train journeys. While the mainstream cinema has several constraints like time limitations, audience expectations and the necessity of making hero centric stories YouTube offers flexibility and variety to the content creators. YouTube allows for short-form content that can focus on specific aspects of train travel without needing to fit into a larger narrative structure. Creators can produce series and episodic content, each episode focusing on different aspects of train travel. YouTube allows for direct interaction with the audience through comments and feedback, fostering a community of shared experiences and stories. Content can be produced and uploaded quickly, allowing creators to respond to current events and trends in train travel.

YouTube offers various formats such as travel vlogs, documentaries, mini-series, and episodic formats for creating authentic contents. While Travel vloggers document their train journeys highlighting aspects like food, seating, and interactions with fellow passengers, documentaries and mini-series delve into specific issues, such as the life of railway vendors, the struggles of daily commuters, or the experiences of migrant workers. Thematic episode creators focus episodes on themes like safety, hygiene, the impact of economic disparity, and the stories of individual

passengers. There are other content creators who use comedic sketches and sequences as social commentaries on the socio-cultural and political issues of the country. Channels like *Parithabangal* use satire and humor to highlight the everyday absurdities and challenges of train travel, making the content engaging and relatable.

In the realm of Tamil YouTube channels *Parithabangal* stands out as one of the best satirical Tamil YouTube channels due to its clever humor, relatable content, high production quality, and strong social engagement. By addressing everyday scenarios and societal issues through a comedic lens, the channel not only entertains but also educates and influences its audience. Through its diverse themes and insightful commentary, *Parithabangal* has cemented its place as a significant player in the Tamil digital content landscape. The key feature of *Parithabangal* includes a masterful combination of humor with social commentary. The sketches are often based on everyday scenarios that the average viewer can relate to, making the content highly engaging and relevant. Despite being a YouTube channel, *Parithabangal's* videos boast high production values, including quality scripting, direction, and editing. The creators pay close attention to the finer details in their sketches. Each video is polished and professional. The creators also incorporate viewer's feedback into their content, making the audience feel valued and heard.

Parithabangal doesn't shy away from critiquing political scenarios and social norms using satire to highlight hypocrisy, corruption, and societal flaws. The sketches balance humor with critical insight, ensuring that the content is thought-provoking without being overly preachy. Sketches based on common life experiences,

such as interactions at shops, dealing with customer service, or family dynamics, resonate deeply with viewers. The channel's content often incorporates cultural nuances and local dialects, adding authenticity and relatability. *Parithabangal* has emerged as a trend setter in the Tamil YouTube community, inspiring other creators to explore satire and social commentary. The channel's content reflects and critiques contemporary Tamil culture, making it a significant cultural touchstone. The channel boasts a high level of viewer engagement, with audiences actively discussing and sharing the videos. While primarily entertaining, *Parithabangal's* content also educates viewers about important social issues, bridging the gap between entertainment and awareness. The channel's satirical take on various issues influences viewers' perspectives, encouraging them to think critically about the world around them.

The train series of *Parithabangal* includes three videos namely "Metro Train Paavangal", "Local Train Paavangal," and "Vadaku Rail Paavangal". Through this series the channel has garnered widespread acclaim for its satirical and humorous take on the everyday experiences of train travel in India. The creators bring to life the various quirks, challenges, and unique moments that passengers frequently encounter on Indian trains. The content resonates deeply with viewers, especially those who have experienced the vibrant and often chaotic world of Indian railway travel. Each scene in this series represents and brings to limelight the various socio-economic issues making it an important contribution to the storytelling landscape.

From a cultural studies perspective, the train series produced by *Parithabangal* serves as a significant counter-narrative to the often-

glamorized portrayal of Indian train journeys found in mainstream media. Cultural studies as a discipline engages with various fields such as political economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, media theory, film studies, cultural anthropology, philosophy, and art history/criticism. This multidisciplinary approach is used to analyze cultural phenomena within societies, focusing on how power relations shape cultural artifacts such as food habits, music, cinema, and sports events. Cultural studies scholars are particularly interested in popular culture and everyday life, which were traditionally considered inferior and unworthy of academic inquiry. By rejecting the strict division between elite and popular culture, cultural studies aim to understand both cultural works and their means of production. "Cultural studies analyse whether the medium (say, film), presents an oppressive/unequal nature of institutions, like family, education, etc. or glorifies them; the possible resistance to such oppressive ideologies; the audience's response to such representation and the economic benefits and the beneficiaries of such representations" (Venugopal 223). This approach highlights how cultural artifacts reflect and influence social dynamics and power structures.

From a cultural studies perspective, mainstream art forms such as cinema, advertisements, and political propaganda often depict Indian train travels through the lens of the elite - the rich and powerful. This perspective tends to highlight the glamour, luxury, and technological advancements, presenting an idealized version of train travel that caters to the aspirations and experiences of the privileged. For instance, significant hype surrounded the launch of the Vande Bharat Express, touted by the Prime Minister of India as

a symbol of the nation's technological progress in the railway sector. However, post-launch feedback from passengers revealed numerous issues such as operational inefficiency, malfunctions, poor signal systems, lack of accessibility, cleanliness, maintenance problems, and high costs. These problems indicate that the Vande Bharat Express, despite its elite branding, shares many of the same challenges faced by other Indian train services, thus failing to live up to the pre-launch promises and fanfare.

Parithabangal's train series provides a starkly different narrative, focusing on the experiences of the common man—the middle class, the downtrodden, and the powerless. By doing so, it offers a more realistic and relatable portrayal of Indian train travel. The series humorously critiques the gap between the elite-oriented portrayal of services like the Vande Bharat Express and the actual experiences of everyday passengers. For instance, one scene depicts a man, specifically a North Indian, repeatedly spitting paan inside the Vande Bharat train—a common occurrence at many North Indian railway stations. This not only highlights the persistence of certain behaviors but also underscores the disconnect between the sanitized, elite vision of train travel and the gritty reality. In the series, the Vande Bharat Express is comically renamed “Dolakpur Express,” inspired by the popular *Chhota Bheem* cartoon series. This renaming serves to parody the overblown expectations and the reality of the train service, illustrating that despite its design for the elite, the Vande Bharat Express faces the same issues as other Indian trains. Through such humor and satire, *Parithabangal* critiques the superficiality of the elite narrative and sheds light on the socio-economic realities of Indian train travel.

In "Vadaku Rail Paavangal," *Parithabangal* effectively uses a striking conversation between a North Indian migratory worker sitting on the luggage rack and a South Indian passenger asking him to get down. This video, especially this scene, went viral on social media after its release. This conversation is not just a humorous moment but a profound commentary on the economic disparities and differences in work culture between North and South India. The conversation reveals that North Indian workers are often hired for construction work in South India because they are willing to work for significantly lower wages, 200 rupees per day, from early morning to late in the evening, a rate and working condition that South Indian laborers would typically refuse.

This stark contrast highlights several critical issues. The willingness of North Indian laborers to work for such low wages underscores the severe economic disparity between different regions of India. It reflects the lack of adequate employment opportunities in their home states, forcing them to accept substandard wages and challenging working conditions in distant places. The conversation also points to the differing work cultures between the North and the South. South Indian laborers, possibly due to slightly better local economic conditions or stronger labor rights awareness, may demand higher wages and better work conditions. In contrast, North Indian laborers, out of necessity, accept lower wages and longer hours. By depicting this scenario, *Parithabangal* critiques the government's oversight in addressing these economic disparities and protecting labor rights. The overcrowded train and the conversation between the passengers illustrate the government's failure to provide adequate infrastructure and support for these migrant workers,

both in their home states and in their destinations. *Parithabangal's* portrayal of this conversation serves as a microcosm of the larger socio-economic and cultural issues prevalent in India. By using humor and relatable scenarios, the series effectively brings attention to these serious issues, encouraging viewers to reflect on the underlying causes of economic disparity and labor exploitation.

Parithabangal meticulously captures the everyday experiences on local and metro trains, providing a hilarious yet insightful commentary on the realities of train transportation in India. The series delves into several key aspects, like passengers evading ticket inspectors, the illegal selling of food items on local trains, the chaos at the ticket counter and much more, portraying them with a keen eye for detail and an understanding of the socio-cultural context. The series also highlights the viral 'chocolate boy vs. rugged boy' scene. In this segment, a well-dressed 'rugged boy' and his girlfriend board the train, and their interactions disrupt other passengers. This humorous portrayal reflects a common sight on local trains, capturing how such antics can disturb daily commuters. Lately, it has become common for youngsters to create Instagram reels on local trains, with boys often performing life-threatening stunts on moving trains to gain attention. *Parithabangal's* train series humorously captures these scenes, while subtly highlighting the dangers such actions pose not only to the individuals involved but also to other travelers. The message is delivered with a comedic touch, making it both entertaining and thought-provoking. The success of *Parithabangal's* train series lies in its hilarious depiction of everyday train travel experiences.

Viewers can't help but burst out in laughter as they watch the clever humor and relatable scenarios depicted in the series.

Parithabangal's Train series not only entertains but also educates, providing a critical look at the socio-economic realities of train travel in India. It highlights the need for better economic policies, labor protections, and efforts to reduce regional disparities, aligning with the broader aims of cultural studies to examine and challenge the power dynamics and social structures that shape everyday life. By presenting the common man's perspective, *Parithabangal's* train series democratizes the narrative around Indian train journeys. It challenges the dominant, elite-centric representations and brings attention to the everyday struggles and experiences of ordinary passengers. This aligns with the goals of cultural studies, which seeks to understand and critique the power relations that shape cultural artifacts and practices. By highlighting the discrepancies between elite promises and common experiences, *Parithabangal's* series provides a valuable counter-narrative that questions the legitimacy of the mainstream, elite portrayals and calls for a more inclusive understanding of Indian train travel. By doing so, *Parithabangal's* train series not only entertains and educates but also serves as a form of social commentary, shedding light on the socio-economic realities of train travel in India. This coincides with the notion of cultural studies to uncover the underlying power relations and social contexts that shape cultural expressions. Through humor and satire, *Parithabangal* critiques the disparities and inconveniences often glossed over by mainstream representations, thus democratizing the narrative around Indian train journeys and making it more inclusive of diverse experiences. The train series by *Parithabangal* exemplifies how popular culture

can serve as a powerful medium for challenging dominant cultural narratives and providing alternative perspectives. It underscores the importance of examining both elite and popular cultural forms to gain a comprehensive understanding of societal values, power structures, and everyday life.

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