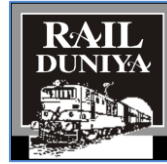




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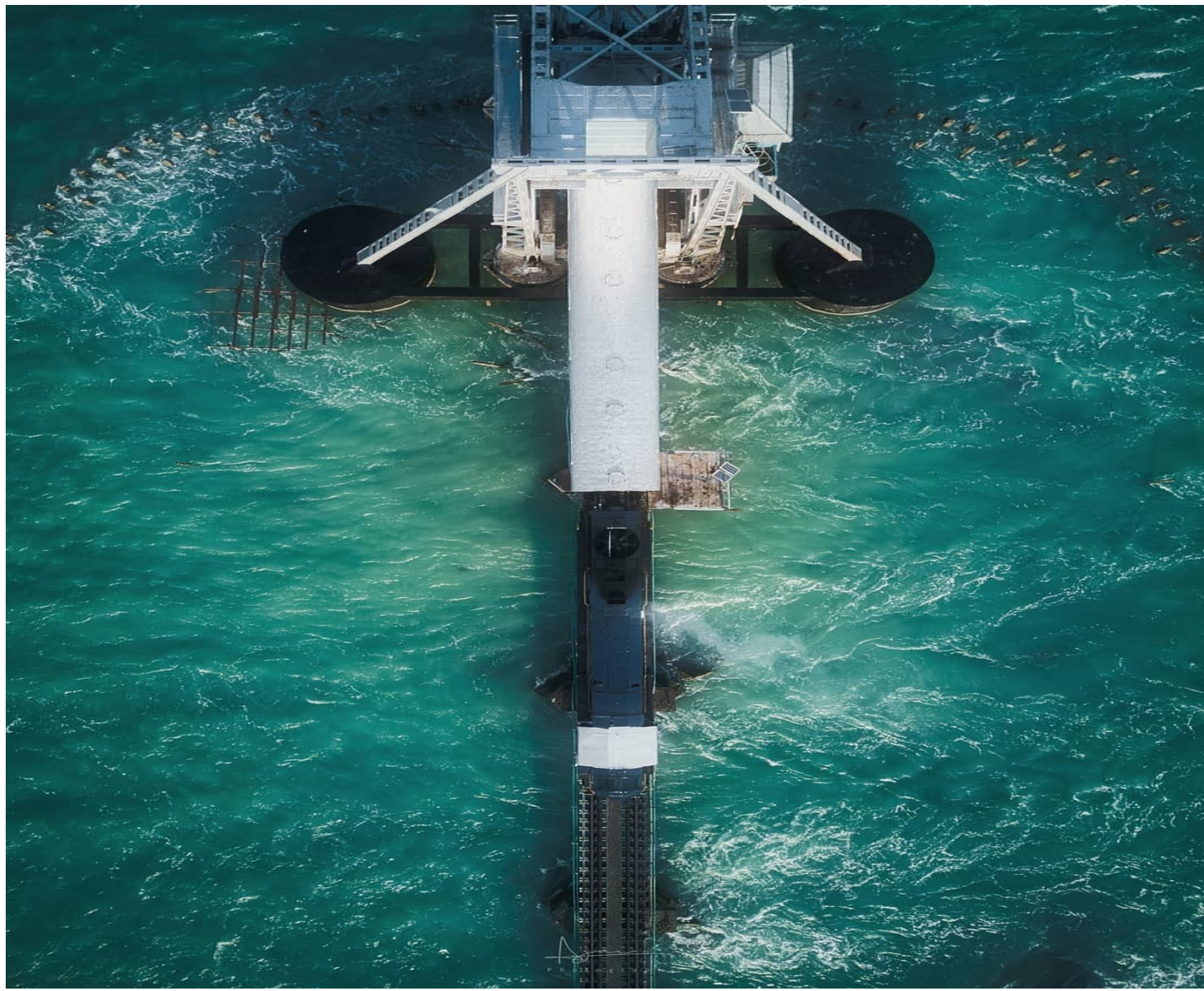
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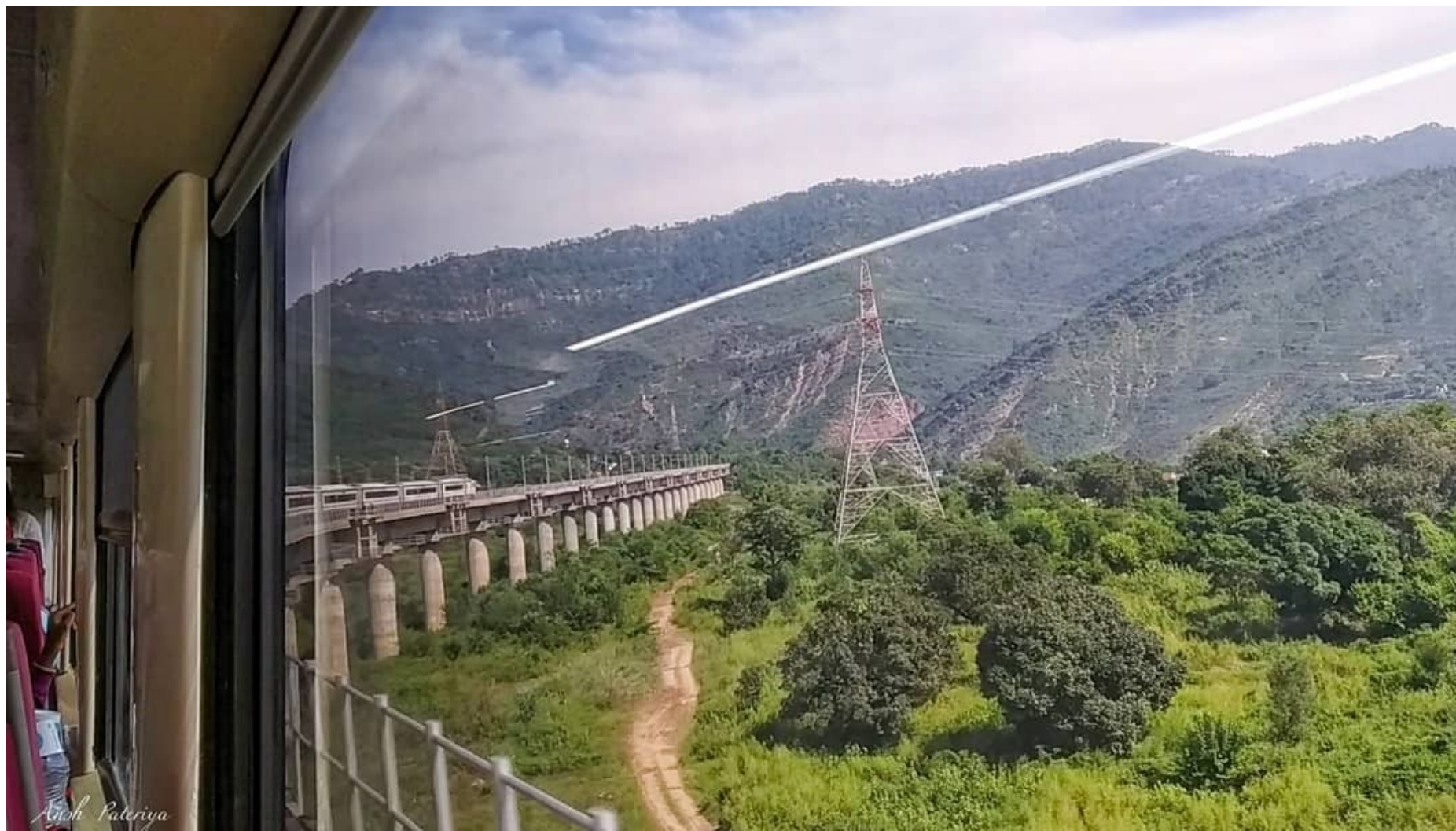
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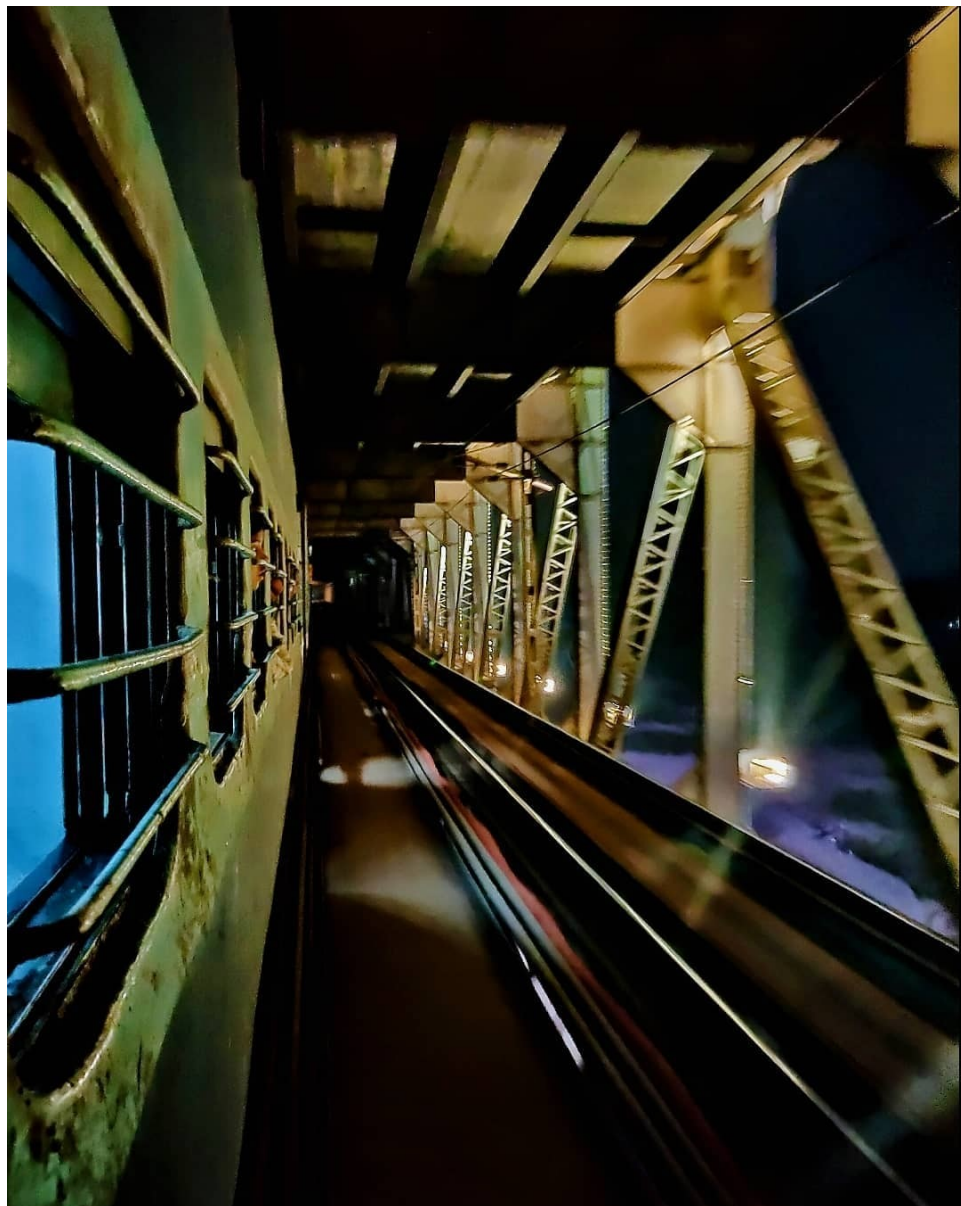
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Articles from the readers

Katyusha

- Debatra Mazumdar

Fortunate enough to be a group of 50 people going on a study tour to Moscow and Saint Petersburg, I tried to make the most of it. The entire one-week stay was very eventful and tiring. I had a hard time catching up on sleep, but it was probably worth the discomfort.

I haven't written down stuff in a while, so please do not mind the ragged prose.

PROLOGUE: DELHI

Moscow has only two connections to India, and both of them are Aeroflot flights that depart from New Delhi at very odd timings. My flight was scheduled to depart at 01.25 hrs and would take six hours to Moscow. Most of western Russia including Moscow and St Petersburg follow UTC+3 which means it is two-and-a-half hours behind Indian time.

I was extremely excited about Russia, primarily for two reasons. One, this would be the first time I'd get to get out of India and two, I am a huge sucker for history and the World War II is arguably the most intriguing period in the recent past. Since the Soviet Union played a huge role in the conflict, this trip was going to be extremely rewarding.

Also, I should make it clear that I would be using Leningrad interchangeably for St Petersburg a lot. So keep that in mind.

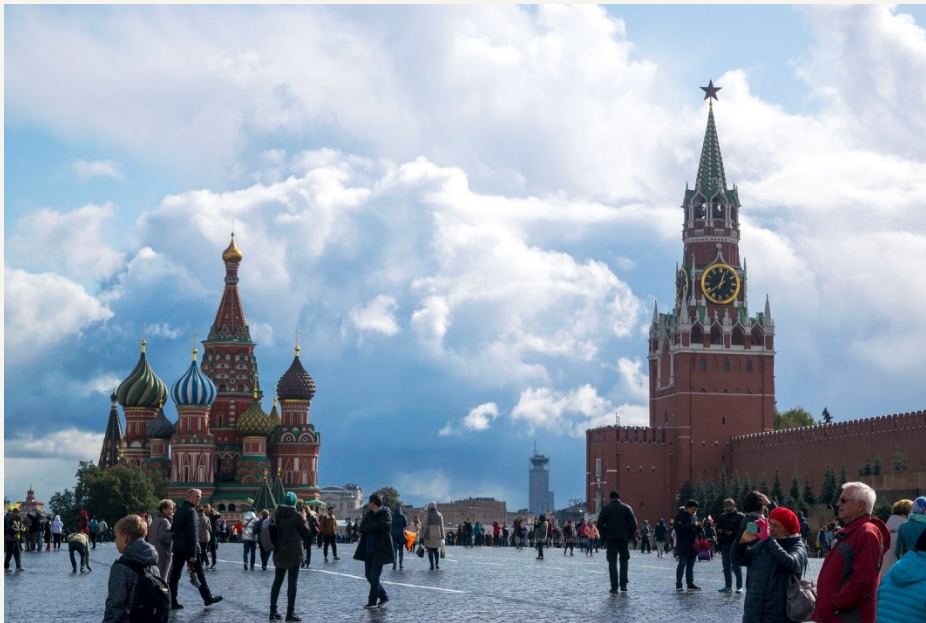
The flight was an uncomfortable one, but the girl next to me somehow managed to sleep with her mouth open. I'm sure she needed to catch some sleep before she had to change flights for Frankfurt at our next stop.

DAY 0: ARRIVAL

The flight SU235 landed at Sheremetyevo International Airport around five-thirty, and the passengers had to be transferred from the airplane to the airport shuttle. That was when the cold wind hit me bluntly in the face. Even though I grew up surviving sub-zero temperatures in the northern plains of India, I wasn't ready for the Muscovite weather yet.

The first order of business was to check into the hotel and then get a local SIM card; the internet is more important than food or some shit, I guess? The internet is cheap but we have it cheaper in India. We did not have anything planned on the first day in the city since it was a Sunday. It was time to take the metro to Red Square.

It started drizzling the moment we got out of Okhotny Ryad, and as a result we ended up finding ourselves inside the State Historical Museum. While it is a grand collection of artifacts from all the documented periods of the regional history, my friends were still visibly unimpressed. Wikipedia says the museum's coin collection alone includes 1.7 million coins, making it the largest in Russia. I did get to see Lenin's Rolls Royce though.



Red Square houses the St Basil's Cathedral on the left and the Kremlin on the right.

Unarguably the most visited site in the entirety of Russia, Red Square was a spectacular sight to behold especially with such an overcast sky.

After spending some time in the area, we decided to return. At that moment I spotted an aged guy selling ushanka fur caps; I realised he was mute while bargaining with him. The ushanka with the hammer and sickle symbol on it would make me a centre of attraction among the locals for the next few days.

We would end up coming to Red Square again at night, only for my friend to make someone faint by banging the restroom door on his face at a KFC.

DAY 1: OKTYABRSKAYA

The first day of the official tour included a visit to the Russian Railways Corporate University. I'll skip most of it because it wasn't particularly interesting. But I did talk to our interpreters about the USSR and communism, and also had lunch in a Soviet-style railway canteen.

Since the interpreters I talked to were around my age (mid 20s), I received mixed reactions. It seems like the public opinion is divided, and most old-timers feel the USSR was better and find it nostalgic. Katerina said that her parents think along the same lines, and she said that people apparently used to work very hard back in the day but were still comparatively happy. I also asked whether there were presently any leftist parties in Russia and if they were popular. She said that communist parties have recently seen a surge in support, and some party members have also been elected in the local government bodies like municipal corporations etc.

Aleksey said the Soviet regime was a great time in their history. When asked about Stalin, he said he was a controversial figure but personally believed that we could only judge him and not really deny his contribution during the Great Patriotic War (as the WWII is known in the post-Soviet states). He even went on to say that he would have probably done the same things that Stalin did.

The plan was then to visit Arbat Street, a pedestrian street that has existed since the 15th century and is now famous for housing a tonne of souvenir shops. After getting discounts because the store-owner thought one of my friends resembled Vivek Oberoi, we decided to roam around the city a bit.

Let's talk about the Moscow Metro a little. Opened in 1935 as the first underground system of the Soviet Union, it is the busiest rapid transit system in Europe. The system is considered a tourist attraction in itself, and the columns and walls of the stations are full of beautiful engravings and murals that are inspired by socialist realism.



The concourse of Kiyevskaya, which lets you change between Lines 3, 4 and 5.

The Metro lets you travel anywhere in the city, and a single ride costs fifty-five rubles irrespective of the distance travelled.

On getting out of Oktyabrskaya, a huge statue of Lenin welcomes you. It is a short walk to Gorky Park, where I was approached by a friendly group of five locals who wanted to take a selfie with a brown person wearing an ushanka.

Meanwhile, people struggled so much with the dearth of choices in food and one of us didn't even realise that the Burger King cheeseburger he was happily gorging on contained beef.

DAY 2: MOSCOW NIGHTS

Before heading 80 km out of Moscow to visit the largest railway marshalling yard in Europe located at Bekasovo, I had to wake up quite early and feed myself on the boring bacon, sausages and eggs routine. The considerable amount of the workforce of the Russian Railways is young and the gender mix is also decently good.

Our interpreters were kind enough to take us to Sparrow Hills before lunch; it wasn't really part of the itinerary. Formerly known as Lenin Hills, it is one of the highest points in Moscow and offers a panoramic view of the city skyline. Moscow State University lies next to the view point.

Moscow State University is arguably the best educational institution in all of Russia. Its building is an architectural masterpiece and is one of Moscow's Seven Sisters, all of which were built in the Stalinist style between 1947-1953.



Moscow State University remained the tallest building in Europe till 1997.

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After having lunch at a quaint little Russian restaurant, we did a half-circle on Line 14, also known as Moscow Central Circle, from Luzhniki to Lokomotiv. It is operated by a city government-owned company through the Moscow Metro. After getting down at Lokomotiv, some young locals shouted “Pakistani” at our entourage. I shouted back saying “Indiyskiy”.

We went to the Embassy of India in Moscow in the evening; me and my compatriots were happy to finally be able to eat some samosas. It is also adorable that we found ourselves at Red Square (again?) during the night appreciating the floating bridge over the river Moskva at Zaryadye Park.

DAY 3: LENINGRAD

I barely managed to wake up and drag my half-asleep ass to Leningradsky terminal barely twenty steps away from our hotel. The plan was to take a train to St Petersburg (or Leningrad, or Petrograd).

You could probably call Sapsan the Russian Rajdhani. Running at the maximum speed of 250 kmph between Moscow and St Petersburg, these Siemens-made trainsets are designed to run upto 350 kmph if the tracks permit. The journey was extremely smooth yet uneventful, except the part where I dropped my lens cover on the railway tracks at Moskovsky terminal never to find it again.



Sapsan at Moskovsky Terminal, St Petersburg.

Since there was not much to do on the day after arrival in the city, the interpreters took us to Peterhof Palace. The place is huge and is located next to the Gulf of Finland, and was occupied by the Nazis during the siege of Leningrad in the WWII. By the virtue of being an extremely popular tourist spot, I found a lot of Asians (colloquial usage please) and Indians there. I also had a hamburger there which probably is the best burger I have ever had in my entire life.

After visiting the Consulate General of India, we spent the rest of the evening enjoying the famed nightlife of Piter (as the locals like to call it) listening to live bands performing just next to Kazan Cathedral at Nevsky Prospekt.

DAY 4: VENICE OF RUSSIA

The first “meaningful” day in Leningrad was spent visiting a wagon container depot located at the outskirts of the city, followed by a visit to Sapsan control centre at Moskovsky terminal.

St Petersburg is often referred to as Venice of the North considering the amount of rivers and canals in the city, and skipping a cruise ride over the river Neva after coming this far would have been similar to committing blasphemy. I mean, I did skip a trip to the Hermitage but meh. It is important to mention that the Hermitage happens to be the second-largest art museum in the world after the Louvre.



St Isaac's Cathedral against the backdrop of an autumn sunset.

The cruise offered views to a great number of touristy places in the city like the Hermitage, Peter and Paul Fortress and Saint Isaac's Cathedral. Let's talk about the last one a little: originally a church, St Isaac's Cathedral was converted into a museum by the Soviet government in 1931 and is perhaps one of the most important landmarks of Leningrad.

The penultimate night in St Petersburg meant going off to a shopping spree buying tonnes of locally-made chocolates and some of that smooth Russian vodka.

DAY 5: KALINKA

Yeah, we would have to wrap up soon now.

After seeing how the Russians maintain their trains at the Sapsan maintenance facility at Shushary, we were taken to the Russian Railway Museum. Considering that Leningrad is a city of museums, it was more than obvious that this one was located here as well. A part of the museum used to be a steam locomotive roundhouse, and currently holds a great number of Soviet-era locomotives and other rolling stock. The tour guide at the museum was an enthusiastic old man who seemed very interested in explaining every nook and cranny of the museum. When I asked him about how he felt about the fall of the Soviet Union, he said it feels like this is his second life now.

At this point, I had a choice to visit the Hermitage but I skipped it in favour of another considerably less popular museum and wandered alone towards Baltiyskaya metro station. As I previously said, the visit to Russia was a great chance to personally witness the lands and events etched in so many memoirs and books, and I was not going to waste it by visiting an art museum, however good it might be.

If Moscow Metro is mesmerising, then Saint Petersburg Metro is breathtaking. Both of them are engineering marvels in their own right. The latter also happens to be one of the deepest metro systems in the world thanks to the city's unique geology (all of it was marshy land) and the deepest by the average depth of the stations.



The portraits of the generals of the Red Army that took part in the WWII.

Museum of the Defence and Siege of Leningrad is a small museum which captures the essence of the Great Patriotic War in general and the siege of Leningrad in particular. It had original Nazi flags, badges and books collected during the war by the Red Army after the German troops retreated towards Berlin. The museum speaks about the courage and perseverance shown about the common citizens of Leningrad at the time. Not to forget the helpful babushka who guided me at the museum despite not understanding any of the gibberish I tried to speak.

The only good fascist is a very dead fascist.

The final night was mostly a blur. But I do remember singing Zombie on karaoke followed by dancing with a beautiful Russian woman after drinking a lot of tequila.

Weekly important news and alerts

रसगुल्ले, भुजिया और अब ट्रेन भी।

मित्रों,

अब तक आप रसगुल्ले, भुजिया खा रहे थे, अब हल्दीराम की गाड़ी भी देख लीजिए।

दरअसल रेलवे के रेवेन्यू बढ़ाने के प्रोग्राम के तहत लोको पर एडवर्टाइजिंग की जा रही है। आपको याद होगा पहले अमूल का भी लोको रेलवे में चल रहा है।



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भारतीय रेलवे की सवारी गाड़ियाँ

- भारत में देश के किसी कोने से किसी भी कोने तक पहुंचने का मूल्य 50 पैसे। चौंक गए न? यह भारतीय डाक के पोस्टकार्ड का मूल्य है। पोस्टकार्ड हमारे भारत देश की ग्रामीण व्यवस्था का मूलभूत संपर्क का साधन है। चाहे कितना ही बिकट पता हो, भारतीय डाक विभाग अपने इस पोस्टकार्ड को लिखित पते पर बराबर पोहोँचाही देता है। पोस्टकार्ड हमारे देश में आम जनता की सबसे सुलभ, सस्ती और सुयोग्य सेवा के दायरे में आता है। चूँकि पोस्टकार्ड 'ओपन मेसेज' स्वरूप में होता है, तो लिखित मेसेज की जानकारी भी सेवा की महत्वता और जरूरी तीव्रता बढ़ाती थी।
- आज रेलवे के लेख में पोस्टकार्ड का उदाहरण देने का कारण है, भारतीय रेल की सवारी गाड़ियाँ। यह ठीक डाक विभाग के पोस्टकार्ड की सेवा से मिलती जुलती है। यह सभी गाड़ियाँ देश के ग्रामीण जनता को शहरों से सम्पर्क करने की बेहद अहम कड़ी है। जिस तरह मामूली शुल्क लेकर भारत सरकार पोस्टकार्ड की सेवा देती है उसी तरह भारतीय रेल भी निम्नमात्र किराया 17 पैसे से 25 पैसे प्रति किलोमीटर से ग्रामीण यात्रियों को शहर से जोड़े रखने का शुल्क लेती है। ऐसी कोई मैन लाइन, ब्रांच लाइन नहीं की जिसमें यह सवारी गाड़ी न चलती हो। ब्रिटिश काल में यही सवारी गाड़ियों से मार्ग के छोटे छोटे स्टेशनों के जमा हुआ रेवेन्यू अपने मुख्यालय तक पोहोँचाने का जरिया थी। पूरे भारतीय रेलवे का नेटवर्क देखा जाये तो सवारी गाड़ी से पूरे देशभर में घुमा जा सकता है, बस उतना आपमें धैर्य, पेशंस होना जरूरी है।
- देश की सबसे लंबी दूरी की सवारी गाड़ी है काचेगुड़ा से गुंटूर के बीच चलनेवाली 57305 गुंटूर पैसेंजर जो की 623km का लंबा रन करीबन 18 घंटे में पूरा करती है और किराया लेती है 105 रुपए प्रति व्यक्ति। याने महज 17 पैसे प्रति किलोमीटर या यह कहिए यात्रा में लगने वाले समय के हिसाबसे 6 रुपए से कम प्रति घंटा।

- इन सवारी गाड़ियोंकी किफायती रेट की बात करें तो, आज शहरोंमें किसी को 2-5 km ऑटो, टेक्सीसे कहीं जाना पड़ जाए तो 40-50 रुपए किराएके लगना सीधी बात है। शहर की सिटी बस, पब्लिक सर्विस भी कमसे कम 2 से 3 रुपए प्रति किलोमीटर तो चार्ज करती ही है।
- यह तो है, की पैसेंजर गाड़ियोंकी सेवा कितनी जरूरी है, लेकिन क्या रेलवे प्रशासन इसे पोस्टकार्ड वाली ट्रीटमेंट देते है क्या? तो इसका उत्तर बेशक नहीं ऐसा आएगा। आम यात्रियोंके लिए यह सवारी गाड़ियोंके सफर कितने मुश्किलोंभरे रहते है। आपने देखा की 623km के लिए 18 घंटे याने एवरेज 34km प्रति घंटा गती तय होती है। यह भी गाड़ियाँ उसी ट्रेक पर चलती है जिसपर राजधानी और बाकी मेल / एक्सप्रेस गाड़ियाँ चलती है। डिब्बे, लोको, लोको पायलट, ओपरेटिंग स्टाफ़ सारे के सारे वहीं लेकिन गाड़ी को समयपर चलाने की बात जब देखते है हमेशा फिसड्डी। हमेशा यह सवारी गाड़ियाँ बेटाइम चलते रहती है। प्रायॉरिटी की तो मांग ही नहीं लेकिन शेड्यूल टाईम में तो चलना चाहिए, क्या यात्रियोंकी यह मांग वाजिब नहीं? छोटे छोटे गाँव की यह गाड़ियाँ दिनभर में ज्यादा से ज्यादा 2 या 3 होती है जो गाँव के लोगोंका शहर जाने के लिए एकमात्र साधन होती है। गाँव से कई छात्र पढ़ने के लिए शहर जाते है, बीमार लोग इलाज के लिए, तो बहोत से लोग अपने रोजगार के लिए शहर जाने के लिए इन्ही गाड़ियोंके सहारे रहते है।
- REPORT THIS AD
- सवारी गाड़ियोंके यात्रियोंकी अपेक्षा किराया कम देने की बिल्कुल नहीं अपितु गाड़ी समयसे चले यह है। गाड़ी 1 – 1 घंटे किसी बड़े स्टेशन से 2 – 4 किलोमीटर दूर आउटर इलाके में सिग्नल का इंतजार करते खड़ी कर दी जाती है तो अंदर बैठे मरीज यात्री, छात्रों, बड़े स्टेशन जाकर दूसरी गाड़ी पकड़ने वाले यात्री, रोजी पर जानेवाले कर्मियोंपर क्या बीतती होगी, क्या प्रशासन इसके बारे में कभी सोचता है?
- माना की बड़े स्टेशनोंसे आसपास के गावोंके लिए EMU, DEMU जैसी लोकल्स चलाई जा रही है, लेकिन लम्बी दूरी की पैसेंजर गाड़ियोंका अस्तित्व प्रशासन नकार नहीं सकता, इन गाड़ियोंका जरूरी है की समयपर चलाया जाना चाहिए। जब

गन्तव्य स्टेशनके आगमन समय मे ढेर सारा मार्जिन समय लेने के बावजूद रेल अधिकारीयों की लापरवाही के चलते इसे प्लेटफार्म नसीब नहीं होता और यात्री हमेशा की तरह इन गाड़ियोंको कोसते अपने कामोंकी ओर रुख करते है।

- रवि वर्मा

2-3 दिसम्बर की कालरात्रि

आज हम स्व. हरीश धुर्वे और उनके 44 साथी कर्मचारियोंको उनकी शहादत पर नमन करते हैं और श्रद्धांजलि देते हैं। आप ने शायद ही इनके नाम सुने होंगे, ऐसे लोग बेनाम शहिद होते हैं जिन्हें ज्यादा प्रसिद्धि नहीं मिलती। लेकिन इन्होंने रेलवे में अपनी सेवा में अच्युत शिखर को छुवा।

वह 2-3 दिसम्बर 1984 की भयानक रात थी, भोपाल जंक्शन पर हरीश धुर्वे अपनी स्टेशन मास्टर की ड्यूटी निभा रहे थे। स्टेशन के करीब यूनियन कार्बाइड के प्लान्ट से अचानक मिथैल आयसोसिएट नामक विषैले वायु का रिसाव शुरू हो गया। प्लांट के आजुबाजुमे लोग दम घुटने से मरने लगे। स्टेशन पर भी यात्रियोंको इस विषैले वायु से साँस लेने में तकलीफ होने लगी। हरीशजी और बाकी भोपाल स्टेशन पर, ड्यूटी में हाजिर अलग अलग कर्मचारियोंकी से मदद से यात्रियोंको सुरक्षित बाहर निकालने में जुट गए।

अचानक उन्हें यह ख्याल आया, जो लोग स्टेशन पर हैं उन्हें तो यहाँ से निकाला जा सकता है या इस इलाके से दूर भी रखा जा सकता है, लेकिन उन यात्रियोंका क्या होगा जो गाड़ियोंमे भोपाल स्टेशन की ओर आ रहे हैं। वो तो यहाँ की त्रासदी, तकलीफ से बिल्कुल बेखबर, अन्जान हैं। कई यात्री तो सोये ही होंगे।

भोपाल बड़ा और मेन लाइन का स्टेशन है, मुम्बई, दिल्ली, चेन्नई की ओरसे लगातार गाड़ियाँ आती जाती रहती हैं। उस वक्त इटारसी, बीना, उज्जैन की ओरसे गाड़ियोंकी कतार एक एक करके भोपाल की ओर आने जा रही थी। उसमें हजारों यात्री, महिलाएँ, बुढ़े, बच्चे, सोचकर हरीशजी का दिल काँप गया। उनको क्या करना चाहिए, यह तुरन्त समझ आ गया। चाहे तो वह और उनके

साथी स्टेशनपर के यात्रियोंको स्टेशन से निकाल कर किसी सुरक्षित स्थानोंपर जा सकते थे लेकिन उन्होंने अपने जान की परवाह न करते, अपने फर्ज पर ध्यान दिया और फौरन अपने कंट्रोल से बात करते हुए सारी परिस्थितियों से उन्हें अवगत कराया।

कंट्रोल विभाग आपातकालीन स्थिति को देखते, तुरन्त ही हरकत में आया। इटारसी की ओरसे आनेवाली गाड़ियाँ एक एक करके पीछे के स्टेशनों मिसरोड़, मंडीदीप, ओबेदुल्लागंज, बुदनी और बीना की ओरसे आनेवाली गाड़ियाँ सलामतपुर, विदिशा में रोक दी गयी। कुल 24 गाड़ियाँ थी जो भोपाल आने से रोकी गयी थी। सोचिए इन 24 गाड़ियोंमेंके यात्रियोंका क्या हाल होता यदि यह गाड़ियाँ सीधे भोपाल आ जाती।

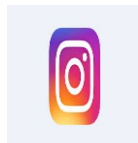
मध्यप्रदेश सरकार के आंकड़े कहते हैं उस दिन की गैस त्रासदी से 3787 लोगोंकी मृत्यु हुई, लेकिन अखबारों और स्थानिक सुत्रोंके आँकड़े कुछ और कहते हैं उस दिन से लेकर दो सप्ताह के भीतर गैस त्रासदी से मरनेवालोंकी संख्या 8000 से ज्यादा थी।



स्टेशन मास्टर हरीशजी धुर्वे का अपने कर्तव्योंको निभाते हुए इयूटी के दौरान, देहान्त हो गया, उनके साथी 44 कर्मचारी भी उस खतरनाक विषैले गैस के प्रादुर्भाव से साँस की बीमारियों से चल बसे।

आज भोपाल स्टेशनपर, जाँबाज, कर्तव्यनिष्ठ हरीशजी धुर्वे और 44 कर्मचारियोंके स्मारक पर श्रद्धांजलि देकर उन्हें याद किया जा रहा है। यह स्मारक सभी रेल कर्मियोंके लिए, अपनी सेवा के प्रति निष्ठा का अटूट प्रेरणास्रोत है।

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