

## Sutradaar

**Drive-by Shooting** – on a ride through the Konkan Coast near Ratnagiri, Maharashtra



**The story of the railway station that went missing**



**Choka Mela** – from the *Amar Chitra Katha Comics*

**Eating at Matunga:** The best there is in snacking.

**Vagrant Birder:** Bird pix from Yamunotri

## Rikki-tikki-tavi *the unforgettable*

Who can forget “*Rikki-tikki-tavi*” from the books by Rudyard Kipling? I can still remember the excitement that I had when I first came across the name in a school textbook. We had a chapter about ‘Rikki-tikki-tavi’ and the name was fantasmawesome for a school syllabus that was boring.



Actually, Rikki-tikki-tavi was the first gateway for most school children in India to read about the Jungle Books, Mowgli, Bagheera and Baloo. Then, one discovered Kim, but that is quite another story. Most of us knew about how mongoose fought snakes, and who won and how, from the vagrant street-fights put up in most cities and villages. But, to read up on it from the angle of a close-up writer, that was different.

I have a family of four that comes regularly, every day, at an almost fixed time schedule, wandering about purposefully in the residential campus at Pune. They also move into the rural police campus and return. They do not disturb the birds gathered at the bird-table established near my camera-hide. Somedays, if the food morsels were tasty and appetising, they stop by and finish the entire loot. They had young ones with them on two occasions during the past twelve months.

If they spot me watching, they stop, look straight at me, as if acknowledging my presence at the bird hide, and keep walking ahead. They seem to know that I mean well for they hide or scamper away when they see other people around. The Kipling story seems to be quite right for snakes have not been seen in the area. They do seem to be a threat to nesting redwattled lapwings but I have not seen them to be victorious. The sad part of all this is that kids nowadays are totally distant from reading Kipling and I feel that they have missed out on a very valuable part of their childhood in India.

## bharatasutras

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*bharatayatra* – my journey

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*Venantius Joseph Pinto, artist from New York – my schoolmate from St. Josephs High School, Wadala, Mumbai, India visiting me in Pune and working out a demo of Japanese Calligraphy*

# bharatayatra

## Drive-by *on the Konkan Coast road near Ratnagiri...*



*The Konkan Coast is known for its Alphonso Mangoes, but, we could miss out on the other native varieties*

The Konkan coast is known for the Alphonso mangoes. Anytime one does visit or drives through the area, the only request that one gets from relatives, friends (and enemies, perhaps!) and colleagues is to bring back Alphonso mangoes by the carton, ie 12 dozens. Everyone's missing the other diamonds of the Konkan coast in terms of mangoes. There are many other local varieties and I did manage to taste several during a ride through in 2009. I hope to return to the Konkan in the non-mango season to be able to get other vegetables and fruits. The tragedy is that I have now begun to prefer a vegetarian diet, though I am yet to convert to absolute vegetarianism. And, if you are a vegetarian, and you are in Konkan, you are totally, totally, missing the diversity of the non-vegetarian cuisine.



There are all these local home-dining establishments along the road from Panvel towards Ratnagiri. You are actually eating in people's houses, except that some have set up open dining sheds under the shadow of wide canopied banyan or peepal trees. The diet is superb, made in the local spicy gravy, in red or white curry, depending on their affinity to Kolhapur or authentic Konkan.



*Home-dining on the Konkan Coast road...*

Several families could be seen coming in two to three vehicles from nearby towns or a drive-through downhill from Panchgani or Mahabaleshwar, nestling high in the Western Ghats. The food is freshly made, with the smell of the spicy gravy floating all around. And God may have mercy on the vegetarians, if you have come to a real expert cook, known by his fame in the entire region.

The menu is usually simple. Veg or Non-Veg. And after that, the question is how many dishes would you choose? Fish, Prawns, Lamb, Crabs, Shellfish, Lobster and Eels or Sting-Rays. The gravy is usually the same, except that it varies when one chooses lamb. There are wheat chapatis, and if you are lucky, rice-flour chapatis to be eaten with hot-hot-hot steamy rice. And if in the correct season, the dessert is – Alphonso or other local mangoes.

## The railway station that went missing...



With Dr. A. K. Jha, IFS, CCF (L.), the Bopodi Railway Station Board, and with Col. Ashwin Baidur from the CME

***Once upon a time, long long ago, as all good stories start, there was once a railway station called 'Bopodi' at the location of the College of Military Engineering, between the twin cities of Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad, in Maharashtra, India, or thereabouts. And then, one fine day, the station disappeared...***

Sometime in 2009, I was invited by Col. Ashwin Baidur to visit the College of Military Engineering campus in Pune, for birdwatching at the amazing man-made and CME-managed lakes. I invited Dr. Arvind Kumar Jha of the Indian Forest Service, and Chief Conservator of Forests, with the Maharashtra State Forest Department to join me so that, someday, somewhere, the forest department could perhaps replicate the effort.

We did the birding, and walking about and photography and all that. It's an amazing campus and there could be many stories within stories about the area. There are spotbill ducks nesting in an amazing wetland within a quarry, wintering waterfowl and storks, grassland birds and small mammals and reptiles apart from all the stuff that the army must be doing within the campus.

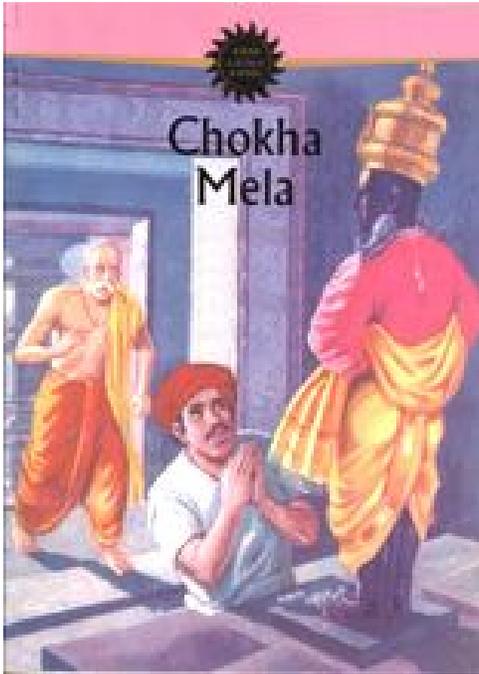
Col. Baidur took us to the Bopodi railway station within the campus. It has a small train standing on the tracks that begin and stop at the platform. There are amazing tales about the railway station and one of it is about how the CME shifted it from its earlier spot and moved it within the campus. The small railway train is from the Indo-Pak war and was kidnapped (*if the word could be used for a train!*) and brought over to the CME campus by some very innovative and enterprising officers and sepoy and jawans and whosoever may have participated.

The railway bogie of the train also serves as a photograph gallery of the CME and its earlier days, including the installation of railway tracks at various places. The railway station has old display boards, a vintage car of an erstwhile commandant, vintage lamps and odds and ends from earlier days. It's amazingly well kept and the habitat around the railway station is maintained in a good condition. It gave us a happy but sort of jittery feeling to look at the railway station, and walk about. Needless to add, there could be stories about ghost trains starting from this railway station and wandering about.

The amazing aspect of this situation is that most of Pune city does not even know that they are missing a railway station and its location. The railway platform is easily accessible and it's a real delight to visit it. I shall try to source more information from Col. Baidur and get to more about the mystery of the missing railway station. With permission from Ashwin, ie Col. Baidur, I hope to show off some of the other photographs of the railway train.

# bharatayatra

## Chokha Mela – from the Amar Chitra Katha Comics



Once upon a time, back there in our childhood, there were the Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) comics that took over the mind of the Indian child. These comics came during the last years of the Indrajal comics from the Times of India Group. The ACK comics had excellent titles and served as a useful reference for spiritual reading. I had earlier written about Chokha Mela and once again went back to the ACK comics to re-read about him. It's hard to believe that as a nation we have silently accepted this injustice in terms of social equity. I realise how difficult it must have been for the ACK editors to include such stark stories within the spiritual framework without hiding them.

## Dining at Matunga – the best there is in snacking



Matunga is the 'Madras of Mumbai' until they went and changed the name to Chennai. The best place for eating up on south Indian delicacies, with the Ram Ashray, Amba Bhavan, Sharada Bhavan and other cafes where time stands still. Some have never changed their furniture. Families have visited these cafes for generations and have their favourites.



*A tale of two plates – Idli + Vada Sambar (L.) & Vada Sambar (R.) at Matunga, Mumbai*

## Vagrant birders



*Blue-winged Thrush, Yamunotri*



*Whitebeeked Bulbuls – busy with foraging at Yamunotri*



*Bluetbroated Barbet at Barkot, enroute to Yamunotri, Uttarakhand, India*

## bharataayana

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Chokha Mela cover page pix is sourced from the NET.

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