

by Shefali Tripathi Mehta

PERIYA NAGA THUNAI

Obed! I steal a glance – puran poli.
Nippet-selling woman lingers
making small talk
with the kid in a red, sequined skull cap
and is soon seated on our long seat.

The women let slip their burkas
on cue from men or place
bright salwar-kameezes are exposed.
Now we all look the same
but the difference
was established first.

Barren landscape
some neem and spiky cacti
pale lantana skirts the tracks.

The honey-skinned girl has moist curls
kiss-shaped lips
knows when to lower her eyes.

A patch of red chillies lies shrivelling
before a hut bound by banana trees
frayed palm arms melt in the sun
a goat digs her hoof into the dry earth.

MARANDAHALLI

When it passes through villages
the train *sounds horn* like a good south Indian
gains speed too, to show off
and lets out diesel exhaust for villages
to receive their share of towns and cities.
Colourful people are lined up
at the railway crossing
seemingly cross.

Wide-mouthed Ashok Leylands
and eager youth astride CBZs
bought from selling land
that wasn't theirs in the first place
wait to leave the village.

I lean out watching
the breeze ruffles my hair, kameez
honey girl looks enviously
at my open-necked freedom.

I envy her shiny nose pin
her green glass bangles
innate feminine charm.

Stench of rot
clogged open drains
we must be near dwelling places.

| Author's note: The above passages are part of a longer poem on a train journey.