

---

# THE EVOLUTION EXPRESS

*Arindam Mohanty*

## INTRODUCTION

The interplay of generations cannot be overstated as an area that needs better understanding, especially in the collective societies of India that allow for inter-generational exchange at multiple levels. Children, parents, grandparents and even great grand-parents all have a say in each other's lives, with decisive impact on everything from spending habits to social, political and economic attitudes.

This collective way of life is at the very core of Indian life – and given that any three to four generations today are rooted in distinct phases of modern India, you typically have a constant intermingling of mindsets, attitudes, opinions and feelings – all coming from very different times and places.

India's multi-faceted character makes the challenge of understanding generational interplay as daunting as it is exciting. The civilizational continuity that you find in the form of customs, traditions and the attitudes of India's people are reflective of how age-old beliefs and ways of life (some which pre-date the Christian era by more than 2500 years) have absorbed the ebb and flow of time, to exist in their present form. The people have absorbed, adopted and adapted much through India's 4500 year old history. Understanding deeply held beliefs and attitudes requires more than compartmentalised enquiries only, but rather, guard-railed explorations in a truly multi-faceted environment that reflects the country itself.

The key to understanding the impact of different generations on each other and changes therein (thereby evolution) lies in bringing the generations together in an environment that breaks away from the sanitised, simulated and heavily 'guided' structures of focus groups and even in-home interviews. Critically, this environment reflects India itself - mobile, dynamic, evolving and multi-dimensional.

This approach to understanding generational interplay harnesses the power of travel as an ethnographic and qualitative research experience, a socio-cultural, economic and political equalizer as the backdrop and the innate peculiarities and uncertainties that only travel can afford (specifically, travel on the Indian Railways – hence 'Express').

## METHODOLOGY

The Indian Railways provide mobility, access and reach to a staggering 4.5 billion people on the third largest railway network in the world. It is certainly the most cost-effective way of criss-crossing the length and breadth of a geographically diverse country. Also, the railways are not the domain of any one particular socio-economic demographic, unlike air travel which is still by and large the privilege of a few. The railways have always exemplified the accommodative spirit of this country, thus allowing for exchange between the many societies. A casual walk along the length of a train will leave you with a sense of inspiration at the cultural and indeed conversational diversity of an accommodative and dynamic country.

Interestingly, the railways suffer from a range of problems that are reflective of India herself – mobilising the hopes and dreams of a billion odd people and yet, painfully archaic and slow, connecting extremes of the country but rarely on time. These paradoxes are reflected in the variety of human experiences on board an Indian Railways train, which encompass and embrace different cultures, age groups, genders and socio-economic classes.

Critical is the proximity to both trying conditions as well as the others with which people travel. Boundaries of personal space break away and to adapt is key. For example, conditions in the local commuter trains in the city of Mumbai are dangerously overcrowded, yet most commuters have 'train friends' – fellow commuters who probably know and understand more about their lives than family. Or, consider an account by the author Khushwant Singh of a newly-wed couple who consummated their marriage in a crowded train compartment in the dead of night – because their slum-dwelling back home afforded no privacy!

*Indians accommodate religious, socio-economic and cultural differences on train journeys, as they are forced to come together on the same platform. The railways are a compelling social equalizer, bringing together without homogenising, allowing identities to flourish. The railways nudge people into being themselves, without reason for pretence. Train journeys are, in a sense, ephemeral – you may never see your co-passenger again and hence, will almost never put up a façade.*

The railways allow for mixing of generations, genders, cultures and backgrounds in an inherently diverse and evolving context - much like India itself, which is challenging to achieve elsewhere. Also, the railways provide an incisive look at India's various hues.

Having played a critical role in major historical, social and cultural events in recent history, such as the independence and partition of India, agrarian revolutions, and rural to urban migration, the railways have inspired artists and story-tellers across genres and media and is a part of the collective life, history and imagination of India. *Perhaps it is the turn of researchers to be inspired?*

For the purposes of understanding generational interplay and change qualitatively, we undertook a couple of journeys – north to south, and west to east through India. Travel on board these Indian Railway trains took us through cities, towns and villages. In totality, we spent around 150 hours on board these trains and captured data through videos, photographs and conversations.

Most critically, the environment on board these trains is such that it allows the researcher to really blend in, obviating the need to 'knock on doors', and have free-flowing conversations that developed organically – narratives that brewed around us and allowed us to pick up on themes, shifts, instances and experiences that provided an insight into how generations feed off, interact and impact one another. Interaction and not interrogation is at the heart of this methodology. In addition, the fact that travel by itself is transient makes people more open, helps them drop their guard and speak not just their minds but what they really feel.

Also, this environment allows us, as researchers, to shed the baggage that we may come with – be it ethnocentricity, cultural biases, etc. – and try to be one with travellers on a journey, together – Ethnography on Wheels – if you may!

## THE RESULTS

Conversations with a rural lower SEC family showed how *patriarchal norms and inter-generational equations are evolving from rigid and suppressive to concessionary and realistic*. For example, a young daughter-in-law having an engaging conversation with her father-in-law on farming techniques other than those used by her family. A few years ago, mere conversation would be penalised, let alone offering a different opinion. Here, the role of recent media and communication expansion is critical. Or younger women demanding that husbands play a role in child care, as opposed to a time when gender roles were compartmentalised – the women runs the home and the man brings in the money to do so.

Younger Indians have newfound confidence in exploring new spaces – with young rural Indians breaking social and cultural barriers by moving to the city, taking up unconventional careers and marrying sans the permission, approval or sanction of parents and extended family – something that was not seen explicitly even a decade ago.

*Buying and saving behaviour in terms of inter-generational exchange are a fascinating study on trains*, famous for vendors who peddle food, books, toys, curios, regional delicacies, amongst much else. The ingenuity of local manufacturers' attempts to adapt is visible – rip-offs and adaptations of popular brands tend to be a hit with travellers. Also, the choices of parents, children and grandparents in an unstimulated environment are worth noting. For example, a father buying a Cadbury's Dairy Milk look-alike chocolate for the dotting grandfather to surprise the unsuspecting child. Or, consider the home-packed, money-saving lunches that the grandparents prefer, as opposed to the parents and children who binge on snacks peddled by vendors.

*Social taboos are spoken about by generations you would not expect*. Promiscuity is not only more rampant than earlier but also, the current generation of young parents are more than happy to share those experiences with strangers, as did a middle-aged housewife from a village who spoke about her lover, while her husband visited the toilet and her young child was lost in the pages of a comic book. It was telling of how different generations look at promiscuity, evidenced by two elderly gentlemen from the same county who had uncharitable views on extra-marital affairs.

*Socio-political stereotyping of generations is often busted on these journeys* - for instance, a young college student who was a strong believer in extreme leftist ideology despite having attended one of the most politically inactive colleges in the country, drawing curious questions and rebuttals from two septuagenarians who were far more concerned about their pending vacations. The tables have indeed turned.

Or, for instance, in a day and age when young Indians are known for being highly ambitious, focused and driven to ace the wave of new-age capitalism, we have some young Indians who simply want more time with friends and family – and not a high flying corporate job. In contrast, senior citizens rooted in the national socialism of the 1950s rue not being born in today's dynamic and upwardly mobile India.

It was fascinating and amusing to converse with an enthusiastic father-son duo who had pledged their support to the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan*, a national cleanliness drive launched recently with much fanfare. Curiously, the father was stopped by the son from tipping the street urchin who was cleaning the floors of the coach. The son believes it is incorrect to reward child labour and in the same breath, tossed empty water bottles under the seat of the train and not in the bin. The father noted but never said anything ... Impossible paradoxes which may hold the key to understanding *how an increasingly aware younger generation is heavily posturing, while an older generation is still looking to make sense of a young India*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Indian trains have the ingredients for a deeply enriching experience for researchers in terms of seeing different generations interact with each other. If the experience of one train journey with open ended questions can help us put the pieces together, a concerted effort could harness a mobile and evolving ethnographic, qualitative and participative setting, allowing for deep-dives into socio-cultural and economic contexts.

Travel with the Indian Railways holds vast potential for us to look at how many generations interact with each other as well as the world outside, with their thoughts, hopes, aspirations, points of discomfort and compromise out there for us to see, observe and participate in and finally, inform key stakeholders.

Generational change can be seen in isolation as well as a stepping stone to understand larger societal dynamics at play.

Interestingly, this methodology need not be restricted to India – but can be expanded to identifying and participating in shared and inhabited spaces *outside* the home in countries across the world. While the following examples are specific to the Indian Railways and India, there is potential to explore airports, music festivals, streets, camps, tour groups, etc., as spaces where we can actually observe people in a pure, raw and unadulterated manner. In emerging and developing economies where collectivism is core, mass transport systems can also be an interesting place to observe people 'living' outside their homes.

A few examples of how this approach can be actionable:

*For government policy, lawmakers and the social sector: Understanding a changing social fabric vis-à-vis gender roles, human rights, caste-based politics, etc.*

To get an early indication and understanding of undercurrents of social change – most governments are slow in detecting the early signs of social change. In emerging economies, archaic laws on everything from inheritance laws to the protection of rights of the underprivileged need a future-forward direction and lens. Early detection is possible in environments that reflect the true character of the nation in motion, harnessing the critical inter-generation dynamic that informs of changing social norms and mores. Also, it opens the researcher up to many possibilities and angles of enquiry that may not have been prompted and spoken about elsewhere.

There are many laws which are currently unfair to minorities of all kinds – religious, economic, sexual, political, social, the differentially abled and so on. With the likelihood of the researcher interacting with many sections of the minority being high, the opportunity exists to engage with these minorities along with different generations, and understand how and why attitudes to them (minorities) change by generation, which by itself will be a time-tracking exercise.

For example – sensing the mood of the TG, delivering on policies and laws related to the alternative sexuality community, as well as becoming more sensitive to the way perceptions of the TG have changed with time and life stage.

*Deep-dives into changing social, cultural and political attitudes*

Understanding the changing contexts around areas like promiscuity, religious segregation, right-wing ideology, workplace stereotypes, gender roles, etc. by looking at their evolution with time, through various life stages. These findings can inform larger public discourse – by bringing to life nuances that are not easy to note and understand under normal circumstances across generations, geographies.

*Urban-rural marketing and branding insights*

Interacting with different generations that continuously engage with a whole host of products and services while travelling can give us specific and pin-pointed insights – especially in food and beverages, small food processing and manufacturing units as well as the rural economy. Hence, this can inform need spaces and need gaps, positioning spaces, etc.

Here, food, personal care and technology become interesting spaces.

Also, getting the opportunity to understand generations' interplay from an urban-rural perspective.

- Observing how different brands in the rural and semi-urban areas are evolving or keeping pace with market leaders – different perceptions of these between generations of children, parents, grandparents (and even great-grand parents)
- Identifying life-level and specific need gaps in FMCG –product, railway journey experience
- Informing SKU strategy given rational, emotional and image need spaces across generations, especially through the food-led interplay.

*Allows for the proverbial 'zoom-out'*

Travel as a tool is an ethnographer's lifeline – yet, the same within a context that is established as representative of much of the country is a priceless experience for qualitative researchers. In being intrepid travellers, the train travel context allows for the researcher to step back and truly allow the self to be seen as just another passenger or human being. This degree of being embedded affords the space that the researcher critically needs to get unadulterated, unbiased and pure reactions. Add to that the comfort of the anonymity and the ephemeral – and respondents will probably never be shy again.

*Zeitgeist for the country and region*

Travel as a tool and experience of qualitative research and ethnographic observation, along with audio-visual archiving and exploration, can potentially turn this exercise into a defining exploration of the beliefs and ideas of the times. This is critical, as this is the all-important 'macro-lens' that is often lost in the urgency of delivering on extremely specific objectives. While the latter will remain, a zeitgeist can effectively lend a macro lens to a host of projects in a given time frame, without having to replicate effort. The entire process could be geared to capture some of the dominant themes and movements, as well as manifestations of emerging ones.

This can actually be used to set the context and tone for broader discussion on the region, as well as to help foreign nationals bust stereotypes and see what the country is actually all about in a balanced and unbiased manner.

*Understanding how Indians travel*

More Indians are travelling today than at any other time – both domestic and international. The railways define regular travel in the country. The trains become invaluable in the effort to understand the deeper cultural and social nuances that kicks in during travel, with or in the presence of different generations. The joint family system and how Indians love travelling with their extended families are interesting areas of enquiry and research. Travel with a joint family will allow for all the angles of interaction and attitudes to travel to be explored. This exploration could inform positioning strategy for brands, product strategy and generate broad level as well as pointed insights on travel itself.

*Immersion for stakeholders to get a sense of the complexities of India*

With time and money at a premium, journeying on the Indian Railways can give the uninitiated a glimpse of just the socio-cultural diversity and complexities of the country – and help them make sense of a country where generalisations are the biggest blunder you can make.

### **THINGS TO PONDER OVER**

At the root of it, the evolution express is a powerful tool to soak in, pick up on organically brewing narratives all around and get a sense of pure, raw and unadulterated nuances from people – and a broad, vast and all-encompassing experience that will leave you with a better understanding of not just generational interplay but also a ‘real, lived’ experience of diversity, socio-cultural interplay and change.

For researchers as well as clients, what strikes as unique is the fact that this methodology embodies the rigour of research through both scale and depth of experience, stokes the curiosity that drives the spirit of journalism and perhaps most importantly, helps us researchers become what we are truly meant to be – story-tellers. Only this time, story-tellers who are inspired by the romance, uncertainty and anonymity that only travel can afford.

### **THE AUTHOR**

Arindam Mohanty is Research Manager, Third Eye Integrated Services Pvt. Ltd., India.

---

# COPYRIGHT

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system of any nature, or transmitted or made available in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of ESOMAR. ESOMAR will pursue copyright infringements.

In spite of careful preparation and editing, this publication may contain errors and imperfections. Authors, editors and ESOMAR do not accept any responsibility for the consequences that may arise as a result thereof. The views expressed by the authors in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of ESOMAR.

By the mere offering of any material to ESOMAR in order to be published, the author thereby guarantees:

- that the author - in line with the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research- has obtained permission from clients and/ or third parties to present and publish the information contained in the material offered to ESOMAR;
- that the material offered to ESOMAR does not infringe on any right of any third party; and
- that the author shall defend ESOMAR and hold ESOMAR harmless from any claim of any third party based upon the publication by ESOMAR of the offered material.

Published by ESOMAR, Amsterdam,  
The Netherlands

Edited by: Deborah S. Fellows

---

# ABOUT ESOMAR

ESOMAR is the essential organisation for encouraging, advancing and elevating market research worldwide.

Since 1948 ESOMAR has brought together the research sector to share knowledge, promote best practice and agree upon the future of the industry as a community, based on common principles of ethical practice.

With over 4800 individual members and 300 corporate members from over 130 countries, we represent a network of over 20,000 industry professionals around the world, promoting the value of market and opinion research in illuminating real issues and bringing about effective decision-making.

To facilitate this on-going dialogue, ESOMAR creates and manages a comprehensive programme of industry specific and thematic events, awards, publications, industry reports and guidelines, trainings, webinars, and communications, as well as continues to actively advocate self-regulation and a worldwide code of conduct.

## ABOUT ESOMAR MEMBERSHIP

ESOMAR represents the industry's interests in the wider business world. Becoming a member ensures we can continue to advocate to national and international legislators with a global united voice, safeguarding of the industry. ESOMAR members, united in their commitment to ethical practice, are active in a wide range of industries and come from a variety of professional backgrounds, including research, marketing, advertising and media.

Membership features include a listing in the ESOMAR Directory of Research, usage of the ESOMAR Membership mark, access to a range of publications (either free of charge or with discount), as well as registration to all standard events, including the annual ESOMAR Congress, at preferential Member rates.

ESOMAR events aim at exchanging ideas, learning about latest developments and best practice and networking with other professionals in marketing, advertising and research. The annual CONGRESS is ESOMAR's flagship event, attracting over 1,000 delegates from over 70 countries worldwide, with a full programme of original peer-reviewed papers and keynote speakers, plus a highly successful trade exhibition.

Full details on the latest membership features and updates are available online at [www.esomar.org](http://www.esomar.org).

## CONTACT US

### ESOMAR

Hoogoorddreef 5

Atlas Arena

1101 BA Amsterdam

The Netherlands

Tel.: +31 20 589 7800

Email: [customerservice@esomar.org](mailto:customerservice@esomar.org)