

# Unlimited Girls

By Meher Marfatia

**Mumbai:** The mood is unmistakably upbeat. Fresh batata vadas make the rounds, as do bags of banana chips, boxes of peanut chikki and bunches of grapes. Two teams face off for an Antakshri battle, belting out current film ditties interspersed with classic hits. Three trendy teens huddle around a fourth, who is sending cooing SMS messages to a boyfriend.

All aboard, it's time for the party on wheels. In a city in which six million people a day travel to work on local trains that are packed with three times more people than they're built to carry, you could start your day fretting and complaining. Or else, you could surrender yourself to the joys of enforced fellowship and let the good times roll, as women in many rush-hour trains do.

"Any chance to celebrate, yaar," declares shop assistant Ambujakshi Vijayan, who has mastered the art of jumping into trains that haven't quite pulled in to halt at the station platform. A Chennai import to the

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city, Ms Vijayan was afraid she'd be at all sea because she only had a smattering of Marathi and Hindi. But she instantly bonded with her travelling companions, and she pronounces Mumbai a warm, friendly place that's openly accepting of newcomers.

Since she routinely bags the same seat, she knows exactly where to spot individual friends. Although other regulars even have fixed standing places, the seated women routinely give the standees a chance to rest, so everyone hits work mint-fresh.

Each of the ladies' compartments in the rush-hour trains is a complex world unto itself. Instead of being viewed as a harrowing journey, most women passengers view their ride as a healthy time out. Never mind jostling beggars and vendors pacing already-crowded aisles with bangles and hairclips. For women walking the tightrope between a home located far from the office they must reach punctually to sign the muster, the train ride is the time to soothe nerves frazzled by nagging in-laws, errant children and office politics. The gal group provides refuge and reassurance, commiseration and courage.

Laxmi Tai, saddled with a singu-

larly unhelpful husband and a mean boss who is stingy even with leave that's due to her, handles the problem pair with remarkable equanimity. "What good thinking about those men constantly?" she asks as she shells green beans for dinner. "I simply long to chat with my train friends. Exchanging news makes you realise nobody's alone in trouble."

Her tired face brightening a bit, Laxmi Tai musters a half-smile to ask, "Let's see your photographs, Vimal." From the corner where she has been praying with Rosary beads, concentrating enough to block out the bhajan-chanting group in the next train, Celia Pinto interjects, "Show me too, I have finished." They pore delightedly over snapshots of the engagement ceremony of Vimal's second cousin's daughter in a tiny town near Nasik. "Take a look," they urge a complete stranger, disarmed but happy to share the goings-on.

Loyalty to one's train friends runs deep. Take Usha Shenoy, an accountsexecutive with a publishing house, who switched tracks after she got married. Instead of the hour-long Goregaon to Churchgate trip on Western Railway, she suddenly had to travel a mere 20 minutes from Matunga to CST on the Central line. But she's still close to her old gang, so she changes trains at Dadar to join in on special days like Holi, Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali, birthdays and wedding anniversaries. That's when stainless steel tiffin carriers are whipped out to reveal samosas, dhoklas and jalebis. Separately packed sabudana snacks are for those who are fasting. Community preferences are readily respected. Id sees Majida treat the bunch to milky-sweet sev rather than Bohri mutton, so that the vegetarians aren't excluded.

Sometimes, the fun spills out of the compartment and they go on picnics and movies together. On predetermined mornings, everyone gets into the train wearing saris. Or there's the pretty prospect of appearing colour-coordinated, a different shade for each Navratri day.

Nothing seems to rupture the bonhomie, not even the recent Mulund bomb blast, which ripped through the ladies' coach. "We can't live in fear," says a woman who works as a secretary. "We did scan the coach carefully for a few days after. But soon, we got noisy again."

*(This series explores the numerous subcultures that add sparkle to the Mumbai mosaic.)*