

SHOOTING TO SAVE



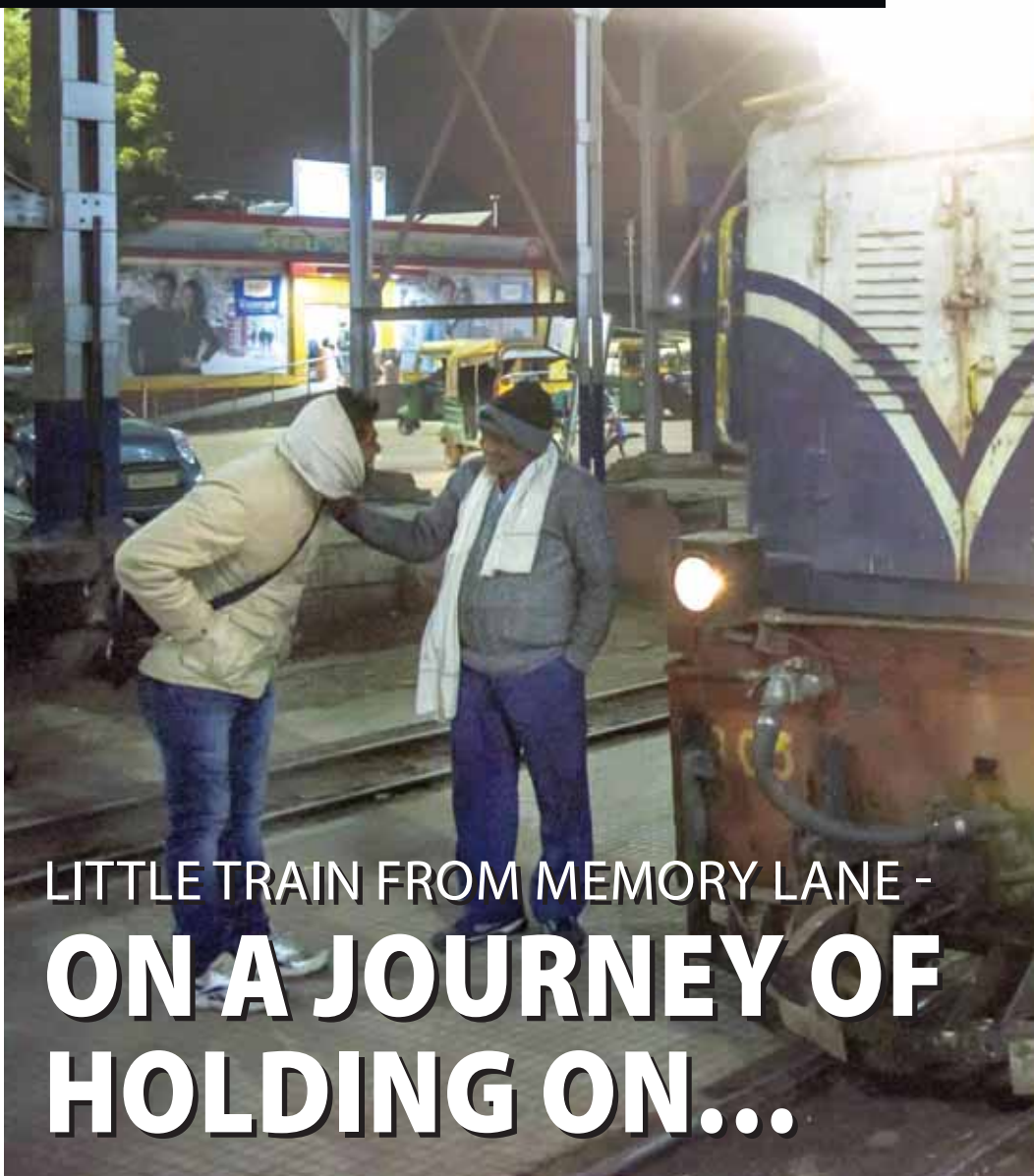
Jayati Saha, Kolkata

A split second storyteller who tells stories without saying a single word, photo-artist Jayati Saha of India, amazes with her frames of nuanced light and shadow, seamlessly fusing her art with technical finesse. Exhibited and owned worldwide, she is a much-in-demand artist, teacher and competition judge. Her extremely sensitive eye has captured moments glistening with human emotions and her forte is seeing the unseen and the unnoticed. Based out of Kolkata, India, Jayati is peripatetic and her journeys have taken her to the India not known or seen by many. Apart from being a contributor at the Getty Images Inc., USA, she was also the adjudicator at the Photography competition hosted by the SAARC, 2015.

It was 5.30 on a winter morning at the railway station of the former princely state of Gwalior. I was waiting on the platform, holding a ticket which I had just bought for the princely sum of Rs.29. When I saw the mist part and a ghostly silhouette pull into the platform, spewing smoke off its top with gusto. It seemed nobody had told the poor old carriage that a couple of centuries had passed.

At first glance it seemed that the Gwalior-Sheopur Kalan passenger train was still trying to hold on to the 19th century, when she was born.

She was to depart at 6.15 am. I had been advised to report early to get a seat – the 'seat' being a few inches of space on one of the hard wood benches that had been polished smooth by the sands of time and generations of rustic bottoms. Turned out 45 minutes early wasn't good enough. Because the 7 bogies, which could hold 200 odd souls, were all taken, by grinning, bright-eyed locals. However, room was made for me by helping hands and



LITTLE TRAIN FROM MEMORY LANE -
**ON A JOURNEY OF
 HOLDING ON...**

Seopur Kalan Passenger Train ready to commence its journey from Gwalior Station.



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Seopur-Kalan Passenger train travels at snail-space.



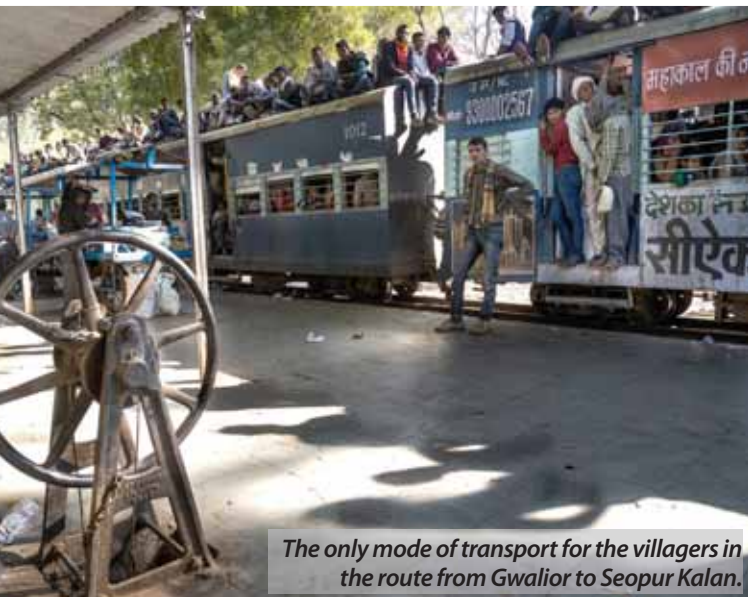
Anwar Khan saab, the driver of the train looks on as a new compartment is being joined.



A passenger jumps from the roof of one compartment to the other.



The train makes an unscheduled stop in the middle of no where.



The only mode of transport for the villagers in the route from Gwalior to Seopur Kalan.



The train passes through the much talked about Chambal area as passengers hang from every gate and also sit comfortably atop the roof.



warm smiles. Curious glances greeted my camera. And history was narrated to me with moustache-twirling pride.

This was the longest remaining narrow gauge route in the world. Covering 198 kms at the stately average speed of 18 kmph. And in the eleven hours that she took to run her course, she cut through the revered Chambal ravines, as if defying the dacoits to stop her if they could. Truth is, she was never stopped, because the Gabbar

Singhs also hitched a ride. The Sheopur passenger train was also the bandits' way of holding on to civilization.

Yes, the train never refused a ride to anyone, said Rambharose Singh Rathore, as he straightened his blue turban, in a desi gesture of tipping the hat to a legend. And even as I heard this story of magnanimity, I looked out and saw living proof of his words – as bouquets of people hung out of every door. Not to

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Villagers peer out of the window.



Passengers sit crammed inside a compartment.

mention scores of dangling feet right outside every window, which were attached to the rooftop travellers. The train that never refused a ride to anyone, was carrying about 3 times her capacity.

I was advised that it needed years of practice to graduate to the elevated status of a rooftop traveller. As the adventurous travellers, while trying to balance themselves on the

rocking roof, have to keep a keen eye on approaching obstacles, and be ready to swing down temporarily when the train passed under low truss bridges. For the non-swingers, the only other option was to lie flat with the crossbeams zipping past barely inches above one's nose. Desperately holding on till their destination arrived.

I learnt that the Sheopur

passenger train was known to make unscheduled stops, pausing as if to catch her breath next to pretty mustard fields, sparkling streams and quaint farmhouses. At one of these breaks, I took the opportunity to cozy up to driver-saab. The elderly Anwar Khan-saab treated his train with the love and tenderness of a lifetime



companion. He told me that after every round trip, he took her personally to the Gwalior rail yard for maintenance. I've had a great run with her, said driver-saab, running his gnarled hand over age-old dials and knobs. And his eyes took on a faraway look, as he tried to hold on to fading memories of younger days and

the melancholic reality of the present, of knowing that his days and that of his beloved train were numbered. Like most of the narrow gauge trains of India, the Gwalior-Sheopur Kalan Passenger Train would soon see its last run.

I returned to my compartment, to be welcomed as an old

friend. Space was recreated, questions on driver-saab's well-being were asked, water was offered. Before I had a sip, I paused and asked Rambharose, which end of the compartment was the toilet? He smiled and shook his head. The train had no toilet.

I had no option but to hold on. 