leaving Dhaka, but not for want of trying. The helper, bizarrely dressed in a pretty sequined shirt, cries out ArissaManikganjArissaManikganj in a singsong way which, if sampled, could be used on a World Music album. Each time we stop he appears to be cajoling people to get on the bus and herding them towards its doors, whether they have a burning desire to sample the delights of Manikganj or not. He's clearly dedicated to his job: that sort of enthusiasm and commitment should take him far in life.

Having said that, this occupation is not without its dangers: at one point he gets into a fight with the helper from another bus company. Harsh words, a cartoonish exchange of blows, and the simmering threat, luckily unfulfilled this time, of both crews piling in. For a moment this gladiatorial contest could go either way, but eventually the gesticulating fighters are pulled apart and we set off again, only for the fight to resume at the next stop. This time, our sequined boy lunges for a plank of wood: the arms race has escalated. By now it's looking so serious that the driver advises him to get off the bus before we reach our destination, in case his rival has amassed a team of angry supporters. Our helper, a boy who could put the "Manic" into Manikganj, is clearly unhappy, but is forced off and left on the open road, a disappearing dot in the back window of the coach, blurred by finely slanting rain.

What a job! I can imagine the job advert. "Want a career which combines travel, excitement, challenge, meeting people and a death wish? The wind in your hair? Money in your hand? Apply here." Other countries like Turkey have helpers on the buses, but their main function is to take your ticket money and pour eau de cologne into your hands to freshen up, not to hang out of the bus at a suicidal angle, banging the side in a vain attempt to shift the traffic.

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As we hit the open road, the bus begins to lurch and judder along. Hey, this driver is bouncing too! But I think that owes more to potholes than to seat engineering. There are several kinds of strange noises from the underside of the bus. It's as if someone has emptied a whole bag of metal tools somewhere in the chassis and they're all clanking about in there. There are creaks, jolts, jangles: we're a mobile factory with full sound effects.

And of course the fun really begins out here on the highway. Some joker with a surreal sense of irony has placed a "No Overtaking" sign at the roadside. I suspect our driver hasn't seen it, or thinks that the red car to the right of the black car on the sign is rather cool and worth copying. As ever, we hurtle into the path of oncoming cars and buses. It's not so bad when you're in one of the bigger buses, but when you're in a tin can on wheels, you suddenly start experiencing flashbacks to your childhood, apologising mentally to all the people you've wronged in life, and considering the music you want played at your funeral.

We've also discovered a new meaning to "lane control". Back home it means staying on the part of the road where you should be: here it signifies total domination of all the available lanes, sending rickshaws spinning off the roadside and wobbling cyclists down into ditches. Occasionally we see an upturned bus, like a dead beetle crashed diagonally amongst the trees, but this clearly has no relevance for our driver, and we plunge on regardless.

Still, there are compensations of course: the glittering dewy countryside, fields of maize under a sky pregnant with rain, the blue shadows of the villages, the arch of branches over the road through which the sun shines in quivering diamonds.

As usual, our own curiosity is no match for that of the people who get on the bus, amazed to see two foreigners aboard this bone-shaking crate. By now of course I am well used to being stared at. It happened in China wherever we went, and is no less a feature of life outside Dhaka. But my reaction to this ogling, which years back went from amused to annoyed to resigned, finally came to rest in serene understanding one fine day, out in the countryside near Rajshahi.

We were on bikes, and had stopped to drink some coconut juice: two obviously outlandish actions when performed by foreigners. In honour of this unprecedented spectacle a crowd of villagers had gathered round in mute awe. Eventually I turned to one of them and asked: "What exactly are you looking at?" The answer came straight and simple: "I'm looking at you." Slightly taken aback, I persisted: "But haven't you ever seen a foreigner before?" The man smiled patiently at me and said, "Of course, but I haven't seen YOU before".

And so it was that day that I learned the lesson which above all has served me through years in this wonderful country: don't ask, just accept. And nowhere perhaps is that more relevant than aboard the Manikganj Express. ■