

STAR FILE PHOTO

Another Way of Looking at Jams

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The other day in my English class I asked the students to tell me what was bad about living in Dhaka. At the top of the list was traffic jams. One particular evening, when on my way to dinner, I found myself sitting in a rickshaw in the midst of the turmoil of a jam on Satmasjid Road and I thought, "yes, there really is a lot of traffic to complain about." But strangely enough, I like it.

In the city of my birth, Sydney, things are much more orderly. There are sometimes traffic jams too but cars wait, for the most part patiently, in long neat queues demarcated by lane lines. People obey traffic lights there.

The contrast with Satmasjid Road couldn't be greater: rickshaws squeezed like citrus fruit filling every tiny crevice of roadway, weaving slowly amongst the battered buses and cars, turning left from the right side of the road or right from the left and sometimes trundling along in the wrong direction altogether. It's a familiar scene.

There was a street kid who must have done something mischievous because a young man had caught him by the arm and in the middle of the vehicle clutter he was busily uttering harsh words, the detail of which could not be heard over the sound of car horns. Some passengers in a tempo got out to mediate, or to find out what the kid had done for all important *adda* purposes, while all the rickshaw passengers and drivers around watched with interest. The young man raised his hand as if to hit the street kid, but the street kid knew it was never going to happen. The mediators from the tempo and the spectators on the other rickshaws knew it was never going to happen too. It was not a serious situation.

The little life scene concluded a few minutes later with the street kid pulling his earlobes and repeatedly squatting as a form of apology, which to western eyes looks so unusual. And then he was on his way. The young man wandered off, the not-required mediators got back into their tempo and the several rickshaw passengers switched their attention to something else as we all inched forward slightly along the road. It's the sort of life encounter that's so commonplace in this city, but for a Sydneysider there's something remarkable about it: to see a young man censure a street kid as though he was his older brother; to see strangers act a little like family members. Bangladeshis I think take it for granted.