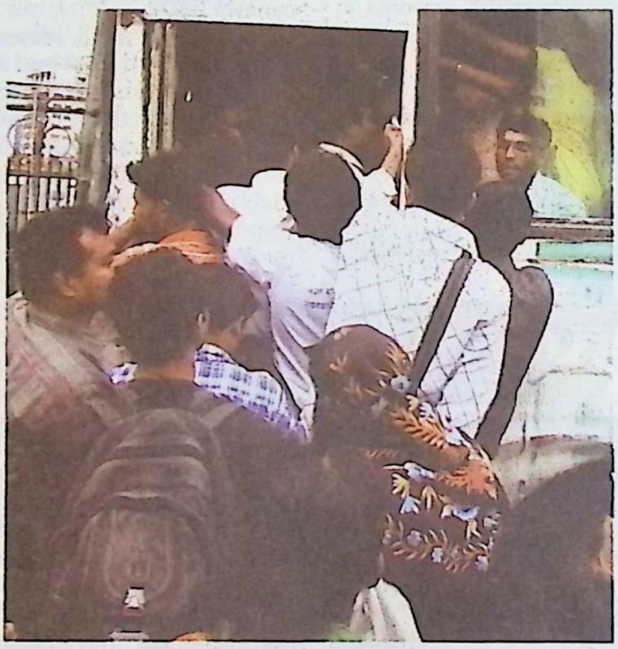


Transport Trials

Rejecting Ridicule, Demanding Respect

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Using virtually any form of transport in Dhaka can be a hazardous enterprise. Not only because of the recklessness of drivers, or even the chaos created by the combination of buses, trucks, private cars, auto-rickshaws, rickshaws and the occasional sleepwalking pedestrian, but because the range of individuals you are likely to encounter covers a wide range of *chirias* (in fact, the largest selection you are likely to find outside of the average *chiria-khana*...).

Bus rides, in particular, can be the equivalent of a virtual safari, albeit considerably less exotic and more than averagely weighted in terms of predators. While the diversity of likely encounters is considerable, there are occasions on which it can get just as rowdy as feeding time in the zoo particularly in the Monkey House (providing an irrefutable reminder of our cousinhood with simians). A colleague of mine, Sharmin, was well-known in our office some years ago, for her ability to retain her sense of humour in the face of the most adverse circumstances. However, she herself was quick to admit that her daily bus rides to and from the office severely tried even her exceptionally sunny disposition.

Most days, she would regale us with stories about incidents that she had witnessed or participated in, invariably reducing us to fits of horrified laughter. Despite it all, she kept smiling. One day, after I had asked her the reason behind her continued good humour, she let me in on a secret. Opening her handbag, she whipped out a very large, lethal-looking safety pin "You know, no matter how hard you try, very often somebody will try to touch you on the bus. The problem is, it's usually so crowded that you can't even see the person who's doing it. So when I find the hand of an unidentified man on any part of my body, I don't bother asking questions anymore I just use *this*!" That was the day I realised that Sharmin's radiant smile masked a steely determination to deal ruthlessly with predatory hands on public transport.

Sharmin's experiences took place several years ago, but I have since been updated by another traveller Polly, who frequently uses Dhaka buses to get her from one place to another, working as a travelling physiotherapy provider. Polly is a feisty, and in my opinion, rather brave young woman. Unlike most people (who tend to be so embarrassed by the harassment they experience that they would rather ignore it than fight back), Polly does not pull her punches. On occasion, literally!

She told me about a recent experience where she had been climbing into a bus when the young man behind her quite deliberately put his hand forward and gripped her breast. "I didn't stop to think about it," she said, "I just reacted. There was nothing to misunderstand because he made no attempt to remove his hand until I had turned around and given him a tight slap. In fact, I was so angry I slapped him three times, and he still wasn't in the least embarrassed!"

Polly was understandably outraged when the young man's reaction to being slapped was to nonchalantly say "*Meye manush boley kichhu bollam na*" ("I'm letting you get away with it because you are a woman")! Even as one of the other passengers dragged him off to the back of the bus, he continued to argue with her. "What was he arguing *about*?" asked an outraged Polly. "I said to him - What do you mean by saying you are letting me get away with it?! What am I trying to get away with it? *You* are the one who touched *me*!"

The truth is, most women travelling on these buses have experienced some variation of this story, though only a few are brave enough to take the kind of action that Polly did. In another instance, an acquaintance of mine, Khaleda, described how utterly exhausted at the end of a