

COMMUTING ON FOOT

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Every day when I step out of my house, I find myself on a rocky hiking trail sometimes referred to as footpaths. As I take the daily routes on foot, I find myself trekking over piles of sand dunes, skipping over cracks and crevices and praying to God that I don't fall into those "cleverly" disguised manholes.

It doesn't really matter whether you wear high heels, flats, or army boots; commuting on foot in Dhaka will leave your feet numb. While I nimbly try to make it from point A to point B without spraining an ankle, I encounter every form of human waste – open drains, saliva, the smell of urine that radiate from the peeling walls, mountains of rotting garbage assembling every other corner. There are days I wonder how I would survive in this city if I had either a) OCD; b) a keen sense of smell; or c) germ-phobia.

It gets even better during monsoon. Instead of just navigating my way around this minefield filled with booby-traps, I have to wade through knee-deep dark "water" and just hope my foot lands on concrete (on second thought, anything semi-solid will do just fine, as long as it's not an open drain).

Now, if that does not manage to convince how dire the situation of sidewalks can be, please be informed that on at least three different occasions, a rickshaw-puller has offered to take me anywhere without fare because "paye hete shombhob nah mama". Definitely not to mention the countless times people I knew stopped me on the roads to give me a lift.

My bruised feet and my frequently sprained ankle could be blamed on the construction of footpaths (or the lack of it). Indeed, it is a major problem for most people who want to commute on foot, but all these issues appear less difficult to surmount when you consider array of difficulties presented by the other fellow companions on the roads.

There's the constant danger of being run over by that guy on his motorbike



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(who prefers to ignore the roadways next to him) speeding through while talking on his phone which is masterfully wedged between his head and his helmet. Even if you do successfully manage to not get steamrolled, expect him to brake hard and hurl abuse at you. "Are you blind? Why are you walking in the middle of the road?" Do yourself a favour – don't bother explaining to him that it's a foot-path. I speak from experience; unfortunately, it almost never works out.

Then of course, are the eve teasers that idly wait for girls to pass by. These predators do not discriminate on what girls wear, decent or otherwise, and more disturbingly they don't discriminate on age. There have been numerous widespread accounts of harassment on the

street, causing outrage on social media. Yet, while some cases do prevail to get justice, not all cases can even be reported. How do I report the countless sets of leering eyes that follow me, regardless of what I wear, whenever I go out? How do I tell people about the degrading songs that are sung as I walk by? And what of all the whistles I am greeted with?

Night ushers in a sense of justification for the fellow companions on the street when it comes to interrupting a girl's personal space. No girl should have to travel alone at night, right? So why not walk into her, try to touch her, take her things off her hand? Also word on the street is, there's an unwritten rule that walking about late at night automatically makes you a flashing target for mugging,

applicable for both genders.

It doesn't usually come as a surprise when I hear my friends say their parents don't like them walking on the street alone – broad daylight or otherwise. While ensuring their child retains pretty, uninjured feet must be a concern, times like this, it's easy to see beyond the frustration caused by the typical parental remark, "What will people say?" and see the underlying apprehension about "What will people do?"

With a keen eye and a broken brain to mouth filter, Mahejabeen Hossain Nidhi has a habit of throwing obscure insults from classic novels at random people who may or may not have done anything to warrant them. Drop her a line at mahejabeen.nidhi@gmail.com

